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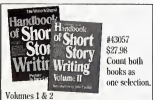
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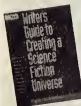
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GLIMPSES OF THE FUTURE

I spoke last time of my insatiable boyhood curiosity, and how my discovery of science fiction when I was ten or eleven years old helped to feed that frustrating hunger to visit other times and places that I could not in any other way gratify. And that set me thinking about those first science fiction stories that I read, back there in the mid-1940s, which had such a vast and permanent impact on my developing mind. In particular, the ones that showed me the far future that I knew I would never live to see: what I thought of then, and still in part do regard, as the most valuable function of science fiction.

What were they like, those visions of the future that kept me awake and in a fever of speculative fantasy during so many nights of my boyhood? How do they look, fifty years later? Quaint and creaky, are they? Or do they still have the power to excite my imagination, even now?, and stir my mind with a sense that I am somehow being granted an authentic look at the eons to come?

The earliest sources of science fiction that I was able to draw upon were books—books that I found in the public library, or that I wangled as gifts from relatives, or was actually able to buy for my-

self (for a dollar or two, which was what many hardcover books cost back then) with my saved-up pittance of an allowance. From the library came the novels of H.G. Wells: *The War of the Worlds*, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, and three or four others, paramount among them *The Time Machine*, with that wondrous vision of a dying sun and Earth's last living thing hopping fitfully about in the blood-red waters of an icy sea—a vision that has never lost its power for me. I also found Don Wollheim's pioneering paperback anthology *The Pocket Book of Science Fiction* there. From Macy's Book Department came three spectacular anthologies, Groff Conklin's *Best of Science Fiction* and *A Treasury of Science Fiction*, and *Adventures in Time and Space*, edited by Raymond Healy and J. Francis McComas. And then, a little while later—it was 1948, now—I began reading John Campbell's *Astounding Science Fiction* and Raymond A. Palmer's garish magazine *Amazing Stories*, and quickly went on to add the other pulp SF magazines of the day to my list, *Startling Stories* and *Planet Stories* and *Thrilling Wonder Stories* and *Super-Science Stories*.

I have before me now a lot of the books and magazines that sent my head spinning in the days when

Harry Truman was President. Is the magic still there? Let me paw the yellowing pages, and see what time has done to yesterday's visions of tomorrow.

Here's a passage from A.E. van Vogt's "The Weapons Shop," first published in 1942: " "

"The sign of the weapon shop was, he saw, a normal-illusion affair. No matter what his angle of view, he was always looking straight at it. When he paused finally in front of the great display window, the words had pressed back against the store front, and were staring unwinkingly down on him. . . .

"There was another sign in the window, which read:

"THE FINEST ENERGY WEAPONS IN THE KNOWN UNIVERSE.

"A spark of interest struck fire inside Fara. He gazed at that brilliant display of guns, fascinated in spite of himself. The weapons were of every size, ranging from tiny little finger pistols to express rifles. They were made of every one of the light, hard, ornamental substances: glittering glassein, the colorful but opaque Ordine plastic, viridescent magnetite beryllium. And others."

Yes. Simple stuff, but it does it for me, still. I need only encounter a few passages of that story's limpid prose and I am back in 1949, trembling with anticipation as I peer through a window into the millennia ahead. And when I read about that sign that you're always looking right at, I picture in my

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mind those little plastic guns of viridescent magnesitic beryllium, and something goes click in my mind and I am in the town of Glay, seven thousand years in the future.

Then there's this—the opening of Poul Anderson's "Tomorrow's Children," of 1947:

"Ten miles up, it hardly showed. Earth was a cloudy green and brown blur, the vast vault of the stratosphere reaching changelessly out to spatial infinities, and beyond the pulsing engine there was silence and serenity no man could ever touch. Looking down, Hugh Drummond could see the Mississippi gleaming like a drawn sword, and its slow curve matched the contours shown on his map. The hills, the sea, the sun and wind and rain, they didn't change. Not in less than a million slow-striding years, and human efforts flickered too briefly in the unending night for that.

"Farther down, though, and especially where cities had been—"

Oh my, the power of that line: *"especially where cities had been"*! The whole radioactive post-civilized world that we all expected and dreaded then uncoiled before my twelve-year-old eyes; and though we seem to have been spared the nightmare world of Anderson's story, I see that wrecked and sizzling world once again, now, as I reread.

Or the truly unattainable remote future, limned for me by John W. Campbell, Jr., writing as

"Don A. Stuart," in 1937's "Forgetfulness":

"The city flamed before him. Across ten—or was it twenty—thousand millenniums, the thought of the builders reached to this man of another race. A builder who thought and dreamed of a mighty future, marching on, on forever in the aisles of time. He must have looked from some high, wind-swept balcony of the city to a star-sprinkled sky—and seen the argosies of space: mighty treasure ships that swept back to this remembered home, coming in from the legion worlds of space, from far stars and unknown, clustered suns; Titan ships, burdened with strange cargoes of unguessed things.

"And the city peopled itself before him; the skies stirred in a moment's flash. It was the day of Rhth's glory then! Mile-long ships hovered in the blue, settling, slow, slow, home from worlds they'd circled. Familiar sights, familiar sounds, greeting their men again. Flashing darts of silver that twisted through mazes of the upper air, the soft, vast music of the mighty city."

Stirs the old nostalgia, yes, indeed: that yearning for futures past that comes over me whenever I think of those old magazines and the unabashedly romantic prose. How grateful I am, to these great writers, for having created these visions for me as I came stumbling wide-eyed into the world of science fiction!

There's so much more that I re-

member fondly from that era: Heinlein's rolling roads, and Lewis Padgett's Twonky and his Time Locker, and the Bild-a-Man Set of William Tenn's "Child's Play," and the robot bartender of Anthony Boucher's "Q.U.R." Those images and dozens just as vivid set my mind aflame, as images out of other, later stories must have done for yours a generation later. (I hope some of them were mine!) Looking at these old stories now, I'm immensely gladdened to see that they still hold their magic for me, and not simply because they evoke nostalgia in me, but because of the intensity with which their authors strove to invent the future.

Let me leave you with the other preeminent passage of my boyhood reading, the one that hit me every bit as hard as the scene in Wells's *Time Machine* of that dismal snow-flecked beach at the end of time. This is from H.P. Lovecraft's novella, "The Shadow Out of Time," of 1936: one of Lovecraft's few excursions into pure science fiction, in which a twentieth-century college professor has a strange

adventure that takes him both backward and forward in time:

"I learned . . . that the entities around me were of the world's greatest race, which had conquered time and sent exploring minds into every age. . . . I seemed to talk, in some odd language of claw clicking, with exiled intellects from every corner of the solar system. There was a mind from the planet we know as Venus, which would live incalculable epochs to come, and one from an outer moon of Jupiter six million years in the past. Of earthly minds there were some from the winged, star-headed, half-vegetable race of paleogean Antarctica; one from the reptile people of fabled Valusia; three from the furry prehuman Hyperborean worshippers of Tsathoggua; one from the wholly abominable Tcho-Tchos; two from the Arachnid denizens of earth's last age, five from the hardy Coleopterous species immediately following mankind, to which the Great Race was some day to transfer its keenest minds *en masse* in the face of horrible peril. . . .

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"I talked with the mind of Yiang-Li, a philosopher from the cruel Empire of Tsan-Chan, which is to come in 5,000 A.D.; with that of a general of the great-headed brown people who held South Africa in 50,000 B.C.; with that of a twelfth-century Florentine monk named Bartolomeo Corsi; with that of a king of Lomar who ruled that terrible polar land one hundred thousand years before the squat, yellow Inutos came from the west to engulf it. . . .

"I talked with the mind of Nug-Soth, a magician of the dark conquerors of 16,000 A.D.; . . . with that of Khepnos, an Egyptian of the 14th Dynasty, who told me the hideous secret of Nyarlathotep;

with that of a priest of Atlantis' middle kingdom; with that of Crom-Ya, a Cimmerian chieftain of 15,000 B.C.; and with so many others that my brain can not hold the shocking secrets and dizzying marvels I learned from them. . . ."

Infinite reach; infinite possibilities. That passage left me stunned and gasping. It still does. It gave me what I knew I could never have in reality, a sweeping look down the corridors of time; and I have sought ever since, both as a reader and a writer, to replicate that experience and those others of my early reading years that I've quoted here—to gain once again that sense of doors opening onto enormous vistas of other realities. ●

Admirers of this column (and I know there are some, because Sheila Williams has sent me innumerable laudatory letters about it, at least seven of them and maybe more) will be pleased to know that a fine, fat collection of my essays was published in February of 1997 by Underwood Books, Inc. under the title of *Reflections and Refractions: Thoughts on Science Fiction, Science, and Other Matters*.

The book contains about ninety pieces—all of them, of course, pungent, provocative, and dazzlingly entertaining. (Do you notice how easily and serenely I've mastered the Asimovian mode of self-appraisal?) Something like half are columns that appeared in this magazine over the past five years. The price is \$19.95 for the large-size paperback edition, or—for the true devotee—\$50 for the very handsome boxed limited edition. Underwood Books are available at most bookstores, but you'll find the book most easily at a shop that specializes in science fiction. (Or drop a line to Underwood Books, Box 1609, Grass Valley, CA 95945 and ask for their catalog, which is full of notable books by Jack Vance, Roger Zelazny, and other fine writers.)

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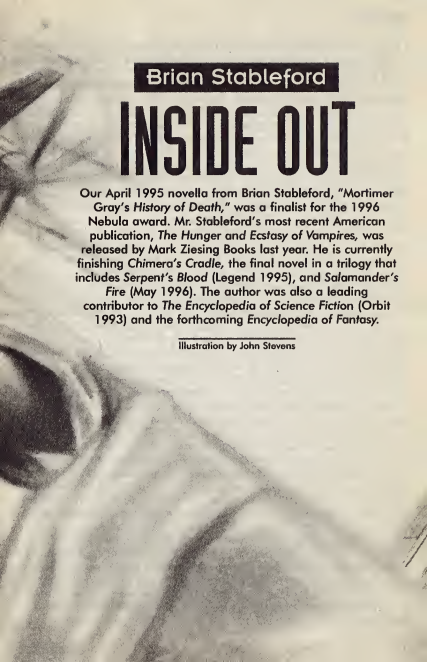
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Brian Stableford

INSIDE OUT

Our April 1995 novella from Brian Stableford, "*Mortimer Gray's History of Death*," was a finalist for the 1996 Nebula award. Mr. Stableford's most recent American publication, *The Hunger and Ecstasy of Vampires*, was released by Mark Ziesing Books last year. He is currently finishing *Chimera's Cradle*, the final novel in a trilogy that includes *Serpent's Blood* (Legend 1995), and *Salamander's Fire* (May 1996). The author was also a leading contributor to *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (Orbit 1993) and the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*.

Illustration by John Stevens

"I'm slightly disturbed by these dreams you've been having," the doctor said, in the solicitous manner he adopted for all his consultations.

"You shouldn't be," Margaret told him. "They frightened me, at first, but they don't any longer."

Doctor Huxley frowned at that. Perhaps he thought that it was impolite of her to stop being frightened of the dreams even though he hadn't yet contrived to explain them. He seemed to have put away his textbook Freud for the time being. Perhaps it would have been kinder had she managed to summon up some forgotten memory of unexpectedly coming across her parents engaged in the sweaty commerce of love, so that he could seize upon it as the commonplace root of her trouble. She had read enough of the great psychotherapist's works to make the fiction convincing, but she didn't want to descend to dishonesty.

"I'm not at all sure that the drug is having the desired effect," the doctor told her. "I'm not sure the Ministry knows what they're doing. I think the experiment ought to be stopped, before it does someone harm."

"It's not doing me harm," Margaret assured him. "I thought it might be, at first, but I don't think so now. I think the dreams are helping me, just as you hoped they would. You shouldn't give up the experiment yet."

"How do you think the dreams are helping you?" he wanted to know.

Unfortunately, she couldn't tell him. A patient couldn't tell her doctor that what he took for dreams were actually real; she had, after all, been judged at least half-mad, else she wouldn't be here. There were some things that simply couldn't be said, lest they be taken as final proof that her madness was absolute. And yet, she thought, she had the right of it. The dreams were not such stuff as dreams were ordinarily made of, and if she had to rebuild her idea of the world in order to accommodate them, that was what she must do, albeit in secret. Why should she not seek a new reality, after all, given that the one she had inherited had failed her so badly, and wounded her so deeply?

"They're helping me to get out of myself," was all she dared say aloud. "They're helping me to see that the frightened creature I'd become, all knotted up and self-enclosed, isn't really me . . . not the whole me, at any rate. It really was a *trauma response*—something that the war did to me. The dreams are telling me—*showing* me—that there are other ways to be."

"I wish I could agree with you," the doctor said, although Margaret couldn't for the life of her see why he couldn't. "Unfortunately, it seems to me that the dreams are *symptoms* of trauma response, transfiguring your problems without diminishing them at all. I'm worried that they might actually be making the grip of the trauma more secure. If only we could decode them we might be able to get at the root of the problem, but while we can't . . ."

"They were distressing at first," Margaret was quick to put in, "and I suppose they're still *disturbing*—but I don't feel that the disturbance is destructive. Sometimes, surely, it's good to be disturbed, if things have become too tightly bound, too *fixed*."

"Sometimes," he conceded—although she knew that it was only a doctor's concession, by way of humoring the patient. "In your case, though, I'm not so sure. Distress can be a warning, you know, and it's possible that the easing of your distress is actually a sign that your condition is getting worse."

"I don't think so, doctor," she told him, as patiently as she could. "I think you've got things inside out. I'm feeling better because I'm getting better, beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel." She turned her head briefly as she heard a sound that might be the drone of a distant aircraft engine, but it was only a housefly that had somehow eased its way into the room and was now intent on finding a way out into the afternoon sunlight.

"I'm glad that you feel that way," Doctor Huxley replied, bringing the full weight of his professional insincerity to bear. "It's good that you're feeling better, but however inside out it seems, there's a world of difference between feeling better for a little while and getting better for good. If we've learned anything during the last seventeen years, it's that winning a battle isn't the same as winning a war."

If we've learned anything during the last seventeen years, Margaret thought, it's that no possible end, no possible victory, no possible settlement, can ever justify the fighting of a war like this one. She didn't say so out loud, not because it mightn't sound sufficiently sane but because it mightn't sound sufficiently patriotic. Doctor Huxley was, after all, an employee of the Ministry of War. She resorted, instead, to a direct approach.

"Please don't discontinue the treatment, doctor," she said. "I really do think that I'm making progress."

"I wish I could see it," he answered, mournfully. Now he, too, was following the fly's wayward trajectory with his speculative eye.

Perhaps you could, Margaret thought, if only you weren't so dutifully blind.

She is walking through a wood in late spring. The trees are discarding their roseate blossom; their vivid crowns are full of birdsong. The grass is moist with the legacy of recent rain. Her feet leave prints in the soft soil whenever she crosses bare ground.

The prints are those of cloven hooves, although she walks erect as befits a sentient being. Even centaurs hold their true selves erect, although they go on four legs instead of on two.

She pauses in the bushes on the edge of a sunlit glade, peeping through a narrow gap so that she may see without being seen.

What she sees is betrayal.

On a bed of moss in the shadow of a gnarled oak a male faun is lying beside a shy nymph. The nymph averts her face from the tentative caress of his hairy hand, although the glint in her green eyes reveals to the watcher that the touch is not unwelcome. One of the faun's shaggy legs reaches out so that the hoof may tease and tickle the back of the nymph's calf; she quivers slightly, but not in anguish, and makes no attempt to rise to her feet.

Why, the watcher wonders, is it always thus? Why do fauns prefer such creatures to their own kind? It makes no sense; it is a jarring note in the great litany of Harmony.

As her jealous heart beats faster, the watcher feels a sudden unease. She looks to the side, where she has seen some movement from the corner of her eye. There, emerging from a thicket not unlike the one in which she herself is hiding, is a creature born of nightmares. It walks erect like any sentient being but its face is utterly brutal, worse than the face of the hoariest of the sileni. Its hide is dark and its joints glint metallically. Its heavy clothing is coarse. Upon its back it carries a curious cylinder from which extends a flexible hose connected to the tub it bears in its horrid hands.

For a single fleeting second, the watcher thinks: *It is justice, after all. Do they not deserve it?*

She has no time to repent the flash of wrath before the monster changes course, abruptly turning its attention to her. She sees the mouth of the tube pointed directly at her, and she sees the great gout of flame that vomits out of it, hurtling to engulf her.

She never feels the heat, let alone the pain, of her own conflagration—but she *knows* how terrible it must be to melt and to burn, to be utterly consumed by fire and fury.

She *knows* . . . and she carries that knowledge with her through dimensions unknown to those she has saved, unsuspected by those who will now escape to continue their betrayal, their defiance of all that is or ought to be sacred.

"Where, exactly, did this come from, Dr. Reed?" Fowler wanted to know.

"Parallel 4972B3," Joanna told him. "My *alter ego* there is fully controlled and active. We're using her to direct experiments in psychic boosting using a variety of drugs. There's a sanitarium in Winchelsea in southern England, set up to treat what they call trauma response. They discarded the term shellshock when they decided that it really was a medical problem and not disguised cowardice. The doctor in charge—a man named Huxley—thinks he's exploring the therapeutic potential of various psychotropic drugs under the direction of the War Ministry. This

is the only patient of his who's so far shown any indication of an ability to make contact with her alternative selves."

Joanna could tell that Fowler wasn't in the least impressed. He'd been part of the project since its inception, long before Joanna's time. For all she knew, he might be the oldest of the Old Guard. His idea of a field agent was one who swashed and buckled her way through a hundred action-filled parallel lives, changing local history left, right, and center in the hallowed name of progress, not one who conducted experiments in psychometry using the parallels as samples and controls.

"So this is an account of a dream reported by one of Huxley's patients?" he said, in his annoyingly punctilious fashion, looking down his nose at the text.

"A drug-assisted dream, yes. Induced by a laboratory derivative of psilocin—that's a fungal alkaloid, similar to psilocybin but lacking a phosphate group."

Fowler was not the kind of man to worry about such trivial details as the presence or absence of a phosphate group. "And why do you think it's of any interest to us?"

Joanna fought to remain perfectly calm, telling herself that it really wasn't Fowler's fault. He simply had an imaginative allergy to data that didn't fit the patterns that the mapmakers were spinning out of the scanning data. It was a medical problem, like any other quirk of brain chemistry.

"What she's describing," Joanna said, carefully keeping her voice neutral, "is a soldier with a flame-thrower. A soldier from one of the Imperialist parallels on axis C."

"That's absurd!" Fowler retorted. "This is the stuff of fantasy! The dreamer can't possibly be contacting an alternative self. She's imagining herself as some kind of female satyr! We've no evidence of the existence of such beings in any of the parallels we've scanned, even as far out as the D axis."

"That depends what counts as evidence," Joanna countered, with painstaking mildness. "We know that most, if not all, of the parallels we've scanned have legends relating to such creatures. The consistency and everpresence of such legends surely suggests that they might actually exist somewhere in the continuum, and that intelligence of their existence is leaking through the mindweb."

Fowler had no sympathy with the school of thought that held that all fantasy was simply altereality glimpsed through the dark glass of multiple self-awareness. He was a pragmatist, who worried far more about the Imperialist threat to the A and B axes than the possibility that their adventures might extend into *terrae incognitae*.

"That's nonsense!" he informed her, loftily. "If the consistency and everpresence of such legends has any bearing at all on the possible exis-

tence of mythical creatures it assures us that they belong entirely to the distant past. One of the few things we know for sure about the multiverse is the consistency of the moment. Insofar as other parallels are accessible to us, they're only accessible to us at precisely complementary points in time. The other selves with which psychics can make contact always exist at an exactly similar point in time."

"Once you grant the possibility that they did exist," Joanna countered, stubbornly, "then it's surely possible that there are a few parallels—albeit distant from the ones we can most easily explore—where such creatures still exist in the everpresent today."

"We've found no evidence of such parallels," Fowler stated, flatly.

"This *is* evidence," Joanna told him, losing the battle to control her impatience. "You're just refusing to acknowledge it as such. If you won't allow any such evidence to be considered, it's hardly surprising that it can't subsequently be *found*, is it? Given that your primary interest is in the parallels most like our own it's entirely understandable that you should focus your attention and your pattern-analyses on axes A and B, but that doesn't mean that there aren't far stranger parallels that are far more difficult for our psychics to contact—so much more difficult that they might require the assistance of psychotropic drugs. Surely there's ample room in a truly infinite multiverse for all kinds of alternative mankind . . ." She was careful enough not to add "undreamt of in *your* philosophy"—not out loud, anyway.

"You can't have it both ways," Fowler informed her, with the predatory air of one who has found a crucial logical flaw in his opponent's argument. "If you're using the alleged presence of an Imperialist soldier to validate this hallucination, you're presuming that this parallel lies close enough to their home bases to permit the large-scale conscription of male *alter egos*. It simply doesn't *fit*, Dr. Reed. It doesn't fit at all."

"I *know* it doesn't fit with present theory," Joanna retorted, still trying her utmost to keep her voice level. "The point is, does it not fit because it's just a dream whose connections to our other explorations arise out of mere coincidence, or does it not fit because our tentative theories are too narrow to encompass the true hyperdimensional geometry and the whole range of phenomena that the multiverse accommodates? If there's the slightest possibility that the latter is the case, we ought to investigate further and more scrupulously, don't you think?"

Joanna could see in the old man's face that his answer was a flat *no*, but even Fowler felt that he ought to prevaricate a little, for safety's sake. No one worked half a lifetime in a madhouse like this without learning to cover his ass. "Tell me about the dreamer's parallel," he said, warily. "What's the state of play there?"

"Huxley's sanitarium is well-supplied with patients because the Great War's still going on."

"Still! That's very unusual."

"But hardly unprecedented." Joanna knew that Fowler had been party to the grand fiasco of 4821B1, where a botched attempt by a handful of agents to bring an unnaturally extended Great War to its "natural" end had instead resulted in the outbreak of the most devastating Plague War ever recorded. The memory of it must still rankle, but his features were frozen, permitting no acknowledgment of the point she had scored.

"The patient's a twenty-six-year-old woman who was working as a nursing auxiliary in Flanders for some years before being sent home," Joanna went on. "If she hadn't been invalidated out, of course, she'd have been killed or captured when Ludendorff finally drove the allies out of continental Europe. Since then he's been sending wave after wave of zeppelin bombers against London, trying to finish the job. Strays must go back and forth over Winchelsea all the time, offering the patients uncomfortable reminders of the conflict, but it's a relatively quiet spot."

"But this woman *was* close to the front for some considerable time," Fowler said. "She must have seen men with flame-throwers and she must have seen their victims. She must also have seen men with protective clothing and gas masks. I presume they're still using phosgene and chlorine as weapons?"

"Worse than that," Joanna conceded. "They introduced Lewisite before France fell; now the zeppelins have brought gas warfare to the streets of London, as well as a new generation of incendiary weapons. I think they call them inflammatols. Not the sort of stuff I'd want to lug around under a hydrogen-filled gasbag the size of a football pitch, but that's modern warfare axis-B style."

Fowler obviously didn't approve of the slight note of flippancy in this last remark. "She's not describing an Imperialist conscript," he said, his voice redolent with unwarranted certainty. "She's merely describing a German soldier—one of those who might well be about to invade and spoil England's green and pleasant land. I don't know why she sees herself as a satyress, but I'm as sure as I can be that it's not because she has another self in some fugitive corner of the multiverse who *is* a satyress. Come back to me if and when you've got something to show me, Dr. Reed. In my view, your team ought to abandon the experiments with psilocin and psilocybin. So far as I can see, there's no evidence at all to suggest that they can boost the latent powers of uncultivated psychics."

The last gratuitous insult nearly cracked Joanna's self-control again, but she managed to restrict the damage to a filthy look. She kept her lips resolutely sealed as she collected her files and stalked out of the room. Not until she was well clear of the great man's office did she begin to let the pent-up emotion go, and even then the obscenities she poured down upon his stubborn head were silent ones.

She is walking along a dusty road, longing for the sight of an inn sign swaying in the warm breeze. The tall hedges to either side of the road conceal fields where the wheat grows tall. Those fields are on the point of turning from a uniform vivid green to the mottled maturity that invites the harvest.

The basket in her arms seems to grow heavier with every step.

As she rounds a shallow bend in the road she stumbles in the rut left by a cartwheel. She staggers into the hedge, which welcomes her into its ungente embrace. From this position she can see around the bend, and what she sees is betrayal.

A young man is there, sitting languidly on a stile with his head tilted back, so that a lamia might stroke his neck with her clawed fingers. He is looking up into her face; the expression in his eyes suggests that she has required no stupefying magic to subdue him.

The watcher remains quite still, accepting the roughness of the twigs that dig into her flesh. She cannot tear her eyes away. Her gaze takes in the seductive expression in the face of the silver-haired temptress with the lustrous skin and the tiny fangs, and its counterpart in the lustful eyes of the young man.

Why, the watcher wonders, is it always thus? Why do men prefer such creatures to their own kind? It makes no sense; it is a jarring note in the great litany of Harmony.

Then she sees something beyond the oblivious pair—something that is approaching at terrible speed.

It is some kind of cart that moves thunderously upon huge patterned wheels, without any horse to haul it. It is manned by monsters with vile, inhuman masks instead of faces, and there is something about their bodies that seems to be more or less than flesh. One of them is pointing a metal wand at the young man and the snake-girl.

For a single fleeting second, the watcher thinks: *It is justice, after all. Do they not deserve it?*

Even as the couple turn to look at the approaching vehicle, however, the monster redirects the device to aim it at the watcher's fluttering heart—and the magical cart sweeps past the stile, heading straight for her.

She hears the roar of the wand, but never sees the missiles hurled from its tip, but she *knows* how terrible it must be to be torn apart, to be ripped and shattered and blasted into shreds.

She *knows* . . . and she carries that knowledge with her through dimensions unknown to those she has saved, unsuspected by those who will now escape to continue their betrayal, their defiance of all that is or ought to be sacred.

Andrew Huxley stood on the lawn outside the west wing of the sani-

tarium, watching the huge silver cigar sliding toward the southern horizon. It was belatedly pursued by a brace of Avro fighters. The zeppelin's escort of Fokkers and Spads had been reduced by half—the aerial battle that raged every day above the Weald must have been unusually fierce—but Andrew knew that the Avros had little chance of weaving a way through them to come within range of their prime target. If only the machine guns mounted on their wings had greater power! If only the anti-aircraft guns that ringed the capital could be fired with greater accuracy!

He turned around as Joanna Reed came up behind him, making sure that he could meet her eyes before she spoke. There was something very disconcerting about the woman; she gave the impression of concealing hidden depths, although she was supposedly a very minor cog in the mighty machine of the War Ministry. He suspected that she was some kind of agent for Military Intelligence.

"All monoplanes," he said, lightly enough. "We never see biplanes anymore, do we? When my father fought with the Army Air Force most Fokkers had three wings, but everything is becoming simpler now, more streamlined. War's good for progress, they say. Ten years more and we'll have such a cornucopia of technical skills that we'll be able to murder our enemies as easily as our combine harvesters mow down fields of wheat."

"No doubt we will," the woman said, with awesome matter-of-factness, "but that's not what I'm here to talk about."

Had the bureaucrats in Whitehall really become so completely inured to the destruction that was being rained down upon them, Andrew wondered. Had they now accepted the war as a mere condition of existence? Or was theirs simply a different kind of trauma response?

"Why are you here?" he asked.

"Your request to discontinue Margaret Lane's treatment landed on my desk. I'm here to deny it. Such a move would be severely deleterious to the experiment."

"It's not the experiment that concerns me, Miss Reed," Andrew told her, making every effort to keep his voice calm and reasonable. "You have to remember that I'm a doctor, and that my first duty is to my patients. I agreed to take part in your testing program because you persuaded me that the drugs you supply might have a therapeutic effect. In some cases, I admit, they do seem to have helped a little—but not in Margaret's. These drug-induced dreams are disturbing her; far from becoming calmer, she's becoming more agitated and more uncooperative. I can't seem to get through to her anymore—she's become furtive and deceptive, and I'm worried that she might be descending into psychosis. I can't in all conscience administer any further doses to her."

"If we're to make a proper judgment regarding the utility of psychotropic medicine," the woman told him, without a flicker of embarrass-

ment, "the experiment must be conducted along proper scientific lines. It must run its entire course."

"Not if it endangers the well-being of my patients," Andrew insisted. "For God's sake, woman, don't you think they've gone through enough already? These men and women have been to Hell, and they haven't yet come all the way back. I'm not interested in the integrity and rigor of your research program; my only concern is to alleviate the suffering of the men and women in my care."

She obviously wasn't impressed by his increasing vehemence. "If we're ever to understand the phenomena of trauma response, Dr. Huxley, we must examine it very carefully and very scrupulously. Until we can understand it, we can't hope to cure it. In any case, there doesn't seem to us to be any cause for alarm; there's no firm evidence that Miss Lane's condition is deteriorating."

She always speaks of "we" and "us," Andrew thought. *It's always impersonal. But who, exactly, is "us"? Whose spokesman is she? To whom is she responsible?*

"How can you say that there's no firm evidence?" he complained. "You've read the accounts of those dreams she's having—indeed, you seem to have read them with great avidity. How can you ignore the signs of disturbance they display?"

"They're only dreams," the woman said, although there was a curious glint in her eye that somehow suggested that she didn't mean what she said.

"Dreams are meaningful," Andrew countered. "They offer us an invaluable window into the depths of the unconscious, if only we can take the trouble to unravel their symbolism. When a person continually dreams of meeting a horrible death it tells me that my patient is far from well, Miss Reed, and getting worse. I'd be a fool—we'd be fools—to ignore these ominous signs."

"What else do Miss Lane's dreams tell you, Dr. Huxley?" she asked, in a manner that suggested that she wasn't going to believe his answer.

"They tell me that the fear of death that has already blighted Margaret's capacity for rational thought and action is on the point of obliterating her sanity altogether," he told her, with what he hoped was disarmingly brutal frankness. "The war for continental Europe may seem to have been a mere matter of moving colored pins around on a map to you, Miss Reed, but to her it was something *real*. It was something going on all around her, year after year, eating away at her inner being until there was nothing left except some little beleaguered island of self—and the injections of psilocin I've been giving her at your request have been the equivalent of Ludendorff's accursed zeppelins, clawing away at that little island's defenses. If I don't stop—if we don't stop—she'll be lost forever."

"Forever's a long time, Dr. Huxley," Joanna Reed informed him, with a

gravity whose blatant insincerity was insulting. "As a matter of interest, though, I wonder what you make of the *settings* of Miss Lane's dreams, and the manner in which she populates those settings."

"The settings are always pastoral," Andrew replied, wondering whether the best chance of getting what he wanted might be to play along with her, at least for a while. "They always contain elements borrowed from mythology—sometimes quite abstruse elements, although Margaret never had any kind of Classical education. They always include a male figure whose dalliance with a female of some subtly different species distresses her. They obviously refer to some unfortunate incident in her past, but she's resisted all my attempts to identify it. It must have been something that happened in Flanders—at a guess, I'd say that she became romantically involved with some young soldier, then suffered a violent reaction when she saw him with someone else—a whore, maybe. I don't want to put ideas into her head by asking leading questions, but I've tried to find out whether something of that kind happened by subtler means and I've got nowhere. What I do know, *for certain*, is that it's doing her no good to relive that moment over and over again, constantly linking it up to images of her own violent death."

"We need more data," the woman insisted, placidly. "We have to keep on collecting it. There may be much more at stake here than you realize."

"No," Andrew said, trying as hard as he could to sound equally definite and equally stubborn, "you're wrong about that. I know that it's not just a matter of one mentally ill girl. I know that there's been a war on for seventeen years, and that its recent phases have produced cases of traumatic response by the trainload. I know what's at stake. It's people like you—people who have become so inured to the idea of mass slaughter that the war's become a mere matter of statistics and strategies—who don't realize that what's really at stake and always has been at stake and always will be at stake are people's *lives* and people's *minds*. I can't stop you thinking of all those young boys you send out with guns and tanks and bombs and airplanes as mere cannon-fodder to be sacrificed wholesale in your *great cause*, but I can make a stand for my patients and I will. I won't feed that poor girl any more of your mind-bending rubbish, and I won't let you do it either."

"I'm sorry you feel that way," said Joanna Reed, "but you really don't have any choice. We need the data, and we intend to have it. It really is important."

Overhead, a lone Avro was returning from its expedition over the blue-grey waters of the channel. The drone of its engine sounded unreasonably waspish as it overflew the sanitarium.

"Sometimes," Andrew said, softly, "I think my patients are the only sane people left in the world. They're the only ones who see things as they really are, in all their unspeakable and unbearable horror. *We're* the

mad ones, because we're the ones who screen that horror out and concentrate our minds on keeping the war going, on killing more and more people more and more quickly. Perhaps you and I are the sick people, Miss Reed. Perhaps Margaret Lane is the one who can see clearly, in her traumatized imagination."

He had thought that Joanna Reed didn't have the capacity to surprise him, but she surprised him then. She was already turning to walk away, and her reply seemed not to be addressed to him at all, but she did reply.

What she said was: "That's exactly why we have to carry on."

Recently returned to human form, she kneels by the stream and scoops up water with which to wash her face. There is always a period of disorientation while her thinking mind regains its forsaken empire; sometimes, just for a few minutes, she retains some memory of what it is like to go on all fours and to live without sentience. It is those precious minutes that inform her of the secret and sacred truth that it is better by far to live as a wolf than as a human being. Wolves are conscious, but not of themselves; they possess—and are possessed by—emotions, but they have no *thoughts* to spoil the ecstasy of their existence.

She looks up when she hears laughter coming from behind a dense clump of bulrushes that grows where the stream widens into a pool. She moves toward the rushes, crawling on all fours as though she were still a wolf. She peeps discreetly through the curtain of vegetation.

What she sees is betrayal. A male wolf is there, sporting with a female—but the female is a wolf through and through, and the male is not. The male is of the *vargr*-folk. He does not know what he is doing, of course—but that is no excuse.

Why, the watcher wonders, is it always thus? Why do werewolves prefer such creatures to their own kind? It makes no sense; it is a jarring note in the great litany of Harmony.

She wants to rise to her feet, but she is afraid that if she does so, the wolves will see her as prey, and might attack.

A noise behind her causes her to look around.

The thing that is coming toward her is a travesty of a man, but there is hardly any flesh about it and its face is utterly evil—not hungry, like the face of a wolf, but something much worse.

For a single fleeting second, the watcher thinks: *It is justice, after all. Do they not deserve it?* But she sees that the creature's inhuman eyes are fixed on her.

From its hand of polished steel the monster launches a spinning cylinder, which turns over and over in the air, catching the sunlight, before it falls into the water beside her and begins hissing madly. The gas released from within turns the placid stream to turbulent foam.

She never feels the silent enemy gripping her throat and her lungs, but

she *knows* how frightful it must be to have the quiet chemistry of one's being violently disrupted, to have poisons surging through one's blood, devouring one's very soul.

She *knows* . . . and she carries that knowledge with her through dimensions unknown to those she has saved, unsuspected by those who will now escape to continue their betrayal, their defiance of all that is or ought to be sacred.

"Get dressed, Margaret. We have to leave now."

Dr. Huxley's voice was unnaturally calm; Margaret could tell that he was trying to give the impression of being in complete control, but she knew that he was fooling himself.

"You don't understand, doctor," she told him, making every effort to match his appearance of calm. "I know what's happening now."

He thrust a bundle of clothes toward her: it included a grey skirt and a starched white blouse; blue socks and a brown pair of shoes. She already had her underwear on, beneath her nightdress; it was a habit she'd acquired in Flanders and never let go. It was always wise to be ready, in case something untoward happened that required a rapid response.

Dr. Huxley obviously thought that something untoward had happened, but it hadn't. This was a safe place—as safe as any could be, given the nature of the world, and the nature of the worlds beyond the world.

"I've figured it out," she told him, as she began to put the clothes on, taking her time so that she'd have time to spell things out. "At first I thought the others were *in* me, but they're not. At first I thought I'd been splintered into a hundred or a thousand selves by some kind of bomb exploding in my mind, but I had it all inside out. I really do have a thousand or a million other selves, but the ones close at hand are all *screaming*, all in agony. Even the ones that are farthest away are under threat. I'm being hunted, you see, doctor . . . hunted across a million or a billion worlds. It was supposed to be over long ago, doctor—three thousand years ago, or maybe more. All the chimeras' children were hunted down, everywhere they existed . . . but some of them weren't so easy to detect, and there are more worlds than anyone ever imagined . . . worlds beyond the worlds beyond the world. *They* think they're everywhere, but they can't really be everywhere, because everywhere's *too large*. No matter what they see, there's always an infinity that lies beyond, glimpsed but essentially *unseen*. No matter how long the Imperial adventure goes on, it will always be continuing; no part of the work can ever be complete, because there's always somewhere where it's only just beginning."

"Come on, Margaret," said Dr. Huxley, softly, as she finally had to finish tying her shoelaces. "I'm going to need your help now. We have to get away from here tonight. I've found a place for you to hide—a place where they'll look after you, and give you a proper chance to recover. There'll be

no more drugs, and the dreams will gradually die away. It'll help a lot if you try to forget them, and try to stop searching them for some kind of cosmic truth that simply isn't there."

While he was speaking Dr. Huxley led her out of the room and down the corridor. She tried to hold back but he wouldn't let her. While they were going down the stairs and through the hall she continued trying to explain, although she knew in her heart of hearts that he wasn't capable of listening to what she said, and couldn't even begin to take any of it seriously.

"It's not the drugs, doctor," she told him. "They just helped to trip the switch. I don't need them anymore; they've done their work. Once the contact is made, it becomes much easier to maintain. If only my *nearer* selves were living peaceful lives I could borrow some of their stability, their peace of mind—but they're not, and they're mostly in such terrible distress that I have to start . . . well, not at *the other end* because there is no end, but at a level of contact that's much slighter . . . so slight that it wouldn't be achievable if it weren't for the horrid necessity of avoiding everything closer at hand. I wish you'd listen to me, doctor, because it really is important. If I could only make you understand. . . ."

They were outside now. The night was cloudy and the windows of the sanitarium were blacked out; only the hall light, shining through the open door, lit the way to the doctor's battered Morris.

"Get into the car, Margaret," Dr. Huxley said, still speaking with the carefully contrived voice of masculine authority. "Just get into the car, and try to stay calm."

Try to stay calm! If only he knew what the price of calmness was! If only he could see that the awesomely simple world he inhabited was simple only because he was blind to its myriad alternatives, and that the sanity he valued so highly was nothing but determined ignorance of the actual nature of the universe . . . of the multiverse. If only he could catch a glimpse, if only for a instant, of the vast spectrum of Dr. Huxleys that extended across the vast spectrum of the worlds that contained him: the thriving and the dying; the wise and the foolish; the joyous and the despairing; the pain-racked and the . . .

The car engine wouldn't start. Dr. Huxley reached under the seat for the crank-handle that had to be inserted into the hole beneath the radiator grille, so that he could turn it over by hand, forcing life into it by the power of muscle and will. That was what he tried to do with his patients. He thought of them as recalcitrant engines that needed to be started by the power of muscle and will.

"You don't understand, Dr. Huxley," she told him. "I can see now. I was blind, but you helped me to see. I know now what the world is really like, and what I really am. None of us is alone, Dr. Huxley—we only think we are because we can't make contact with our other selves. Maybe that's a

good thing, in a way, because there's so much pain out there and so much confusion. Everybody is dying *somewhere*, everybody is screaming in pain *somewhere*, everybody is something they don't want to be, everybody is something they don't even believe in, everybody is everywhere and everything and it simply isn't *bearable* unless you can somehow get past the ones who are hurting . . . even then, it isn't easy, especially when they're the *nearest* ones, but it *can* be done. . . ."

The engine wouldn't start. Dr. Huxley kept turning the handle, but it only went *clunk*, like something dead and leaden.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Huxley," said a new voice, "but I really can't allow you to do this."

Dr. Huxley dropped the crank-handle and whipped around. His composure had vanished on the instant and he was all panic now. Margaret recognized the woman who'd spoken; she was called Joanna, and she was a regular visitor at the sanitarium. Recently, she'd taken quite an interest in Margaret and her dreams. It was almost as if she understood what was happening to her.

Unfortunately, *almost* wasn't good enough.

Margaret didn't recognize the two men Joanna had with her. They reminded her of policemen or army officers because of the way they carried themselves, but they weren't in uniform. That was surprising—almost all men of their age were in uniform nowadays. There was a war on.

In fact, there were more wars on than they could possibly imagine, and bigger ones too.

Margaret heard the purr of an engine then, but it wasn't the engine of Dr. Huxley's car; it was the engine of an airplane high in the sky. She couldn't see it, because the night was too dark, but she strained her ears, trying to figure out which way it was going.

It was coming nearer, from the northwest, and it wasn't alone. She could hear other engines: several high-pitched ones, and one that sounded a deeper, calmer note.

"She's my patient," Dr. Huxley said to Joanna. "My only duty is to her."

"You know that's not true, Dr. Huxley," Joanna replied. "Your first duty is to your country, which is at war. Violation of that duty is called treason."

Margaret took leave to wonder what all the other Joannas were like, even though she knew that it was a meaningless question. There were so *many* Joannas that they were like anything and everything. Somewhere, there must be Joannas who knew that they were not the only Joannas. Somewhere, there might be a Joanna who knew exactly what this Joanna was doing, and maybe even why. *That* Joanna would doubtless consider herself to be the wisest of all the Joannas, and her world the ultimate world of all: the baseline of the entire multiverse . . . but she'd be wrong, because she couldn't possibly be right. The multiverse was simply

too big, too nearly infinite, to be based on any single way of thinking, any simple way of being. In the multiverse, everything that could be true *had* to be true; only fools and madmen could ever hope to impose some tyranny of similarity upon its infinite variety.

"You have all the answers, don't you?" Dr. Huxley said. "The war justifies everything you want to do, however cruel or crazy. The menace of Luddendorff licenses any mad whim that happens to cross your bureaucratic little mind. You don't realize that you've already lost. Even if you win in the end, you've lost—because you've surrendered to the principle of the end justifying the means."

"Get out of the car, Miss Lane," Joanna said.

Margaret didn't see why Joanna had to be so formal; she'd always called her Margaret before.

The cacophony that possessed the sky had become much louder now; the noise of the airplane engines was overlain by the mad chattering of machine-guns. As Margaret stepped out of the car she looked up into the dark sky, where not a single star shone through the clouds. She knew that the invisible stars were there, though: thousands upon thousands of them. She knew, too, that beyond the thousands that could be counted were millions more . . . and beyond them, billions. There was no end to the universe of stars save for that imposed upon it by the limits of human vision.

I don't understand why my nearer selves are all screaming, Margaret thought, as she stared up at the smothering curtain of the dark, looking for the tiny pinpricks and threads of light that would be the Avros and the Sopwiths and the Spads and the Fokkers firing and firing and firing at one another with the aid of their brand new nightsights. *Surely it can't be like that for everyone who learns to see. Surely some of them must find that their nearest and dearest selves are happy and healthy and full of life.*

The sky caught fire.

For a moment, Margaret thought that it really was *the sky* that was burning: that the entire vault of Heaven, with all its stars, seen and unseen, had begun to burn. Then she realized that the zeppelin that had been trying to slip back across the channel had been caught by its pursuers, and that its gargantuan gasbag had been breached by tracer-fire. The hydrogen in the envelope had ignited, and turned into a beautiful burning cloud.

Hydrogen, she knew, was lighter than air. The cloud would rise as it burned, heading toward infinity.

The envelope of the zeppelin, alas, was much heavier than air. It fell, along with the car and the engines, dragging terrible billows of fire down to the waiting earth.

Why, she wondered, is it always thus? It makes no sense. There's no jus-

tice in it at all. But the multiverse is the multiverse; there's no great litany of Harmony, nor could there ever be, no matter how we might desire it in our foolishness. There's only chance and change, ebb and flow, birth and rebirth, extinction and creation, darkness and the light. There's only everything.

Margaret didn't panic when she realized where the debris would fall, and what the consequences of its fall would be. Dr. Huxley and Joanna were panicking, trying to run away even though they didn't know which way to go, but Margaret stayed where she was, shrugging off the clawing hand that Dr. Huxley reached out to her, half-heartedly, as he turned to run. He couldn't even begin to imagine what was about to happen to him, but that only added to his terror. The woman, on the other hand, had a slightly different glint in her eye, as if she *could* begin—but only just—to grasp the triviality as well as the enormity of it all.

Margaret, by contrast, knew exactly what it would be like to burn and to scream. She even knew what it would be like for that scream to echo across the dimensions, unsuspected by those who might escape to continue their petty betrayals and their stubborn defiance of all that was or ought to be sacred.

She knew, too, that in the furthest reaches of the multiverse, there were selves even stranger than the selves that were the stuff of legend. She knew that there were selves stranger than she could ever imagine, who were never in pain and never in danger, some of whom would never, ever die. They were not her like her at all, and yet they *were* her, and their great and infinite community could not be threatened by her own obliteration or the obliteration of a hundred thousand like her. This was not the immortality promised to her by the Church, but it was a kind of immortality worth knowing and worth savoring.

As the burning debris cascaded down upon them all, casually smashing the two running figures to the ground, Margaret thought that it did not matter, after all, whether there was any justice in the world or not. As her flesh melted on her bones, she took more comfort from that thought than she had ever known before, or had ever been likely to know. ●

We appreciate comments about the magazine, and would like to hear from more of our readers. Editorial correspondence should include the writer's name and mailing address, even if you use e-mail. Letters can be e-mailed to 71154.662@compuserve.com or posted to Letters to the Editor, Asimov's, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020. Letters may be shortened and edited for publication. The e-mail address is for editorial correspondence only—questions about subscriptions should be directed to Box 5130, Harlan, IA 51593-5130.



Kage Baker

NOBLE MOLD

The author resides in Pismo Beach, California, with a thoroughly unpleasant parrot. Of her debut tale in *Asimov's* she says, "Noble Mold' is the first published story in a series about the immortal agents of a twenty-fourth-century salvage company run by an all-powerful cabal of scientists and investment bankers. There really was a Fr. Rubio living at Santa Barbara Mission at the time this story covers, and his portrait can be seen at the museum there, smirking out at the visitors with an expression that implies that he knows more than he's telling. . . ."

For a while I lived in this little town by the sea. Boy, it was a soft job. Santa Barbara had become civilized by then: no more Indian rebellions, no more pirates storming up the beach, nearly all the grizzly bears gone. Once in a while some bureaucrat from Mexico City would raise hell with us, but by and large the days of the old missions were declining into forlorn shades, waiting for the Yankees to come.

The Company was operating a Receiving-Storage-and-Shipping terminal out of what looked like an oaken chest in my cell. I had a mortal identity as an alert little padre with an administrative career ahead of him, so the Church kept me pretty busy pushing a quill. My Company duties, though, were minor: I logged in consignments from agents in the field and forwarded communiqués.

It was sort of a forty-year vacation. There were fiestas and fandangos down in the pueblo. There were horse races along the shore of the lagoon. My social standing with the de la Guerra family was high, so I got invited out to supper a lot. And at night, when the bishop had gone to bed and our few pathetic Indians were tucked up for the night, it was relaxing to



sneak a little glass of Communion wine out on the front steps of the church. There I'd sit, listening to the night sounds, looking down the long slope to the night sea. Sometimes I'd sit there until the sky pinked up in the east and the bells rang for Matins. We Old Ones don't need much sleep.

One August night I was sitting like that, watching the moon drop down toward the Pacific, when I picked up another immortal somewhere out there in the night. It was following the shoreline, coming around the point at Goleta; got up on the Camino Real and followed it along, until it turned inland and came straight up the hill in my direction. Company business. I sighed and broadcast, *Quo vadis?*

Hola, came the reply. I scanned, but I knew who it was anyway. *Hi, Mendoza*, I signaled back, and leaned up on my elbows to await her arrival. Pretty soon I picked her up on visual, too, climbing up out of the mists flowing along the little stream; first the wide-brimmed hat, then the shoulders bent forward under the weight of the pack, the long walking skirt, the determined lope of the field operative without transportation.

Mendoza is a botanist, and has been out in the field too long. At this point she'd been tramping around Alta California for the better part of twelve decades. God only knew what the Company had found for her to do out in the back of beyond; I'd have known, if I'd been nosy enough to read the Company directives I relayed to her from time to time. I wasn't her case officer anymore, though, so I didn't.

She raised burning eyes to me and my heart sank. She was on a Mission, and not the kind I was lounging on the front steps of. I smiled cheerily. "How's it going, kid?" I greeted her in a loud whisper when she was close enough.

"Okay." She slung down her pack on the step beside me, picked up my wine and drank it, handed me back the empty glass and sat down.

"I thought you were back up in Monterey these days," I ventured.

"No. The Ventana," she replied. There was a silence while the sky got a little brighter. Far off, a rooster started to crow and then thought better of it.

"Well, well. To what do I owe the pleasure, et cetera?" I prompted. She gave me a sharp look.

"Company Directive 080444-C," she said, as though it were really obvious.

I'd developed this terrible habit of storing incoming Green Directives in my tertiary consciousness without scanning them first. The soft life, I guess. I accessed hastily. "They're sending you after grapes?" I cried a second later.

"Not just grapes." She leaned forward and stared into my eyes. "*Mission* grapes. All the cultivars around here that will be replaced by the varieties the Yankees introduce. I'm to collect genetic material from every remaining vine within a twenty-five mile radius of this building." She looked around disdainfully. "Not that I expect to find all that many. This place is a wreck. The Church has really let its agricultural program go to hell, hasn't it?"

"Hard to get slave labor nowadays," I shrugged. "Can't keep 'em down on the farm without leg irons. We get a little help from the ones who really bought into the religion, but that's about it."

"And the Holy Office can't touch them." Mendoza shook her head. "Never thought I'd see the day."

"Hey, things change." I stretched out and crossed my sandaled feet one over the other. "Anyway. The Mexicans hate my poor little bishop and are doing their level best to drive him crazy. In all the confusion with the missions being closed down, a lot of stuff has been looted. Plants get dug up and moved to people's gardens in the dark of night. There are still a few Indian families back in some of the canyons, too, and a lot of them have tiny little farms. Probably a lot of specimens out there, but you'll really have to hunt around for them."

She nodded, all brisk. "I'll need a processing credenza. Bed and board, too, and a cover identity. That's your job. Can you arrange them by Oh-Six-Hundred Hours?"

"Gosh, this is just like old times," I said without enthusiasm. She gave me that look again.

"I have work to do," she explained with exaggerated patience. "It is very important work. I'm a good little machine and I love my work. Nothing is more important than My Work. You taught me that, remember?"

Which I had, so I just smiled my most sincere smile as I clapped her on the shoulder. "And a damned good machine you are, too. I know you'll do a great job, Mendoza. And I feel that your efficiency will be increased if you don't rush this job. Take the time to do it right, you know? Mix a little rest and rec into your schedule. After all, you really deserve a holiday, a hard-working operative like you. This is a great place for fun. You could come to one of our local-cascarón balls. Dance the night away. You used to like to dance."

Boy, was that the wrong thing to say. She stood up slowly, like a cobra rearing back.

"I haven't owned a ballgown since 1703. I haven't attended a mortal party since 1555. If you've chosen to forget that miserable Christmas, I

can assure you I haven't. You play with the damned monkeys, if you're so fond of them." She drew a deep breath. "I, myself, have better things to do." She stalked away up the steps, but I called after her:

"You're still sore about the Englishman, huh?"

She didn't deign to respond but shoved her way between the church doors, presumably to get some sleep behind the altar screen where she wouldn't be disturbed.

She was still sore about the Englishman.

I may have a more relaxed attitude toward my job than some people I could mention, but I'm still the best at it. By the time Mendoza wandered squinting into morning light I had her station set up, complete with hardware, in one of the mission's guest cells. For the benefit of my fellow friars she was my cousin from Guadalajara, visiting me while she awaited the arrival of her husband from Mexico City. As befitted the daughter of an old Christian family the señora was of a sober and studious nature, and derived much innocent pleasure from painting flowers and other subjects of natural history from life.

She didn't waste any time. Mendoza went straight out to what remained of the mission vineyard and set to work, clipping specimens, taking soil samples, doing all those things you'd have to be an obsessed specialist to enjoy. By the first evening she was hard at work at her credenza, processing it all.

When it came time to loot the private gardens of the *Gente de Razón* her social introductions went okay, too, once I got her into some decent visiting clothes. I did most of the talking to the Ortegas and Carrillos and the rest, and the fact that she was a little stiff and silent while taking grape brandy with them could easily be explained away by her white skin and blue veins. If you had any Spanish blood you were sort of expected to sneer about it in that place, in those days.

Anyway, it was a relief for everybody when she'd finished in the pueblo and went roving up and down the canyons, pouncing on unclaimed vines. There were a few Indians settled back in the hills, ex-neophytes scratching out a living between two worlds, on land nobody else had wanted. What they made of this woman, white as their worst nightmares, who spoke to them in imperious and perfectly accented Barbareño Chumash, I can only imagine. However she persuaded them, though, she got samples of their vines, too. I figured she'd soon be on her way back to the hinterlands, and had an extra glass of communion wine to celebrate. Was *that* ever premature!

I was hearing confessions when her scream of excitement cut through the subvocal ether, followed by delighted profanity in sixteenth-century Galician. My parishioner went on:

"... which you should also know, Father, was that I have coveted Jua-

na's new pans. These are not common iron pans but enamelware, white with a blue stripe, very pretty, and they came from the Yankee trading ship. It disturbs me that such things should imperil my soul."

Joseph! Joseph! Joseph!

"It is good to be concerned on that account, my child." I shut out Mendoza's transmission so I could concentrate on the elderly woman on the other side of the screen. "To covet worldly things is very sinful indeed, especially for the poor. The Devil himself sent the Yankees with those pans, you may be certain." But Mendoza had left her credenza and was coming down the arcade in search of me, ten meters, twenty meters, twenty-five . . . "For this, and for your sinful dreams, you must say thirty Paternosters and sixty Ave Marias . . ." Mendoza was coming up the church steps two at a time . . . "Now, recite with me the Act of Contrition—"

"Hey!" Mendoza pulled back the door of the confessional. Her eyes were glowing with happiness. I gave her a stern look and continued the Act of Contrition with my somewhat disconcerted penitent, so Mendoza went out to stride up and down in front of the church in her impatience.

"Don't you know better than to interrupt me when I'm administering a sacrament?" I snapped when I was finally able to come out to her. "Some Spaniard you are!"

"So report me to the Holy Office. Joseph, this is important. One of my specimens read out with an F-M Class One rating."

"And?" I put my hands in my sleeves and frowned at her, refusing to come out of the role of offended friar.

"Favorable mutation, Joseph, don't you know what that means? It's a mission grape with a difference. It's got *Saccharomyces* with style and *Botrytis* in rare bloom. Do you know what happens when a field operative discovers an F-M Class One, Joseph?"

"You get a prize," I guessed.

"*¡Sí señor!*" She did a little dance down the steps and stared up at me in blazing jubilation. I hadn't seen her this happy since 1554. "I get a Discovery Bonus! Six months of access to a lab for my own personal research projects, with the very finest equipment available! Oh joy, oh rapture. So I need you to help me."

"What do you need?"

"The Company wants the parent plant I took the specimen from, the whole thing, root and branch. It's a big vine, must have been planted years ago, so I need you to get me some Indians to dig it up and bring it back here in a carreta. Six months at a Sciences Base, can you imagine?"

"Where did you get the specimen?" I inquired.

She barely thought about it. "Two kilometers south-southeast. Just some Indian family back in the hills, Joseph, with a hut in a clearing and a garden. Kasmali, that was what they called themselves. You know the

family? I suppose we'll have to pay them something for it. You'll have to arrange that for me, okay?"

I sighed. Once again the kindly padre was going to explain to the Indian why it was necessary to give up yet another of his belongings. Not my favorite role, all things considered.

But there we were that afternoon, the jolly friar and his haughty cousin, paying a call on the Kasmali family.

They were good parishioners of mine, the old abuela at Mass every day of the week, rain or shine, the rest of the family lined up there every Sunday. That was a lot to expect of our Indians in this day and age. They were prosperous, too, as Indians went: they had three walls of a real adobe house and had patched in the rest with woven brush. They had terraced their tiny hillside garden and were growing all kinds of vegetables on land not fit for grazing. There were a few chickens, there were a few little brown children chasing them, there were a few cotton garments drying on the bushes. And, on the crest of the hill, a little way from the house, there was the vineyard: four old vines, big as trees, with branches spreading out to shade most of an acre of land.

The children saw us coming and vanished into the house without a sound. By the time we reached the top of the winding stony path, they had all come out and were staring at us: the toothless old woman from daily Mass, a toothless old man I did not know, the old son, the two grown grandsons, their wives and children of assorted ages. The elder of the grandsons came forward to greet us.

"Good evening, little Father." He looked uneasily at Mendoza. "Good evening, lady."

"Good evening, Emidio." I paused and pretended to be catching my breath after the climb, scanning him. He was small, solidly built, with broad and very dark features; he had a stiff black mustache. His wide eyes flickered once more to Mendoza, then back to me. "You have already been introduced to my cousin, I see."

"Yes, little Father." He made a slight bow in her direction. "The lady came yesterday and cut some branches off our grapevines. We did not mind, of course."

"It is very kind of you to permit her to collect these things." I eyed Mendoza, hoping she'd been tactful with them.

"Not at all. The lady speaks our language very well."

"That is only courtesy, my son. Now, I must tell you that one of your vines has taken her fancy, for its extraordinary fruit and certain virtues in the leaves. We have come back here today, therefore, to ask you what you will accept for that near vine at the bottom of the terrace."

The rest of the family stood like statues, even the children. Emidio moved his hands in a helpless gesture and said, "The lady must of course accept our gift."

"No, no," said Mendoza. "We'll pay you. How much do you want for it?" I winced.

"She must accept the gift, please, Father." Emidio's smile was wretched.

"Of course she shall," I agreed. "And, Emidio, I have a gift I have been meaning to give you since the feast of San Juan. Two little pigs, a boar and a sow, so they may increase. When you bring down the vine for us you may collect them."

The wives lifted up their heads at that. This was a good deal. Emidio spread out his hands again. "Of course, little Father. Tomorrow."

"Well, that was easy," Mendoza remarked as we picked our way down the hill through the chaparral. "You're so good with mortals, Joseph. You just have to treat Indians like children, I guess, huh?"

"No, you don't," I sighed. "But it's what they expect you to do, so they play along." There was more to it than that, of course, but something else was bothering me. I had picked up something more than the usual stifled resentment when I had voiced my request: someone in the family had been badly frightened for a second. Why? "You didn't do anything to, like, scare those people when you were there before, did you, Mendoza? Didn't threaten them or anything, did you?"

"Heavens no." She stopped to examine a weed. "I was quite polite. They weren't comfortable around me, actually, but then mortals never are. Look at this! I've never seen this blooming so late in the year, have you?"

"Nice." I glanced at it. I don't know from plants. I know a lot about mortals, though.

So I was surprised as hell next day when Emidio and his brother appeared at the mission, trundling a cart full of swaying leaves into the open space by the fountain. I went out to greet them and Mendoza was behind me like a shadow. She must have been prowling her room, listening for the squeak of wheels.

"This is very good, my sons, I am proud of you—" I was saying heartily, when Mendoza gave a blast of subvocal fury.

Damn it, Joseph, this is wrong! These are just clippings, they haven't brought the whole vine!

"—but I perceive there has been a misunderstanding," I continued. "My cousin requested the vine itself, with its roots, that she may replant it. You have brought only cut branches, apparently." The Indians exchanged glances.

"Please forgive us, little Father. We did not understand." They set down the traces and Emidio reached into the back. "We did bring all the grapes

that were ripe. Maybe it was these the lady wanted?" and he proffered a big woven dish of grapes. I looked close and noticed they did have a funny look to them, a bloom on the skin so heavy it was almost . . . furry?

"No," said Mendoza, in clearest Chumash. "Not just the grapes. I want the vine. The whole plant. You need to dig it up, roots and all, and bring it here. Do you understand now?"

"Oh," said Emidio. "We're very sorry. We didn't understand."

"But you understand now?" she demanded.

"I am certain they do," I smoothed. "What remarkable grapes these are, my sons, and what a beautiful basket! Come in and rest in the shade, my sons, and have a cool drink. Then we will go catch one of the little pigs I promised you."

By the time we got back, Mendoza had vanished; the grapes and the vine cuttings were gone too. The brothers trudged away up the hill with their cart and one squealing shoat, his legs bound with twine. Pig Number Two remained in the mission pen, to be paid on delivery of the vine. I figured if the wives got that message they'd see to it the job got done.

Mendoza came out when they were gone. She looked paler than usual. She handed me a sheet of paper from her credenza. "This is a Priority Order," she told me. "I sent them the codes on the grapes and clippings anyway, but it's not enough."

I read the memo. She wasn't kidding; it was a first-class transdepartmental Priority Gold telling me I was to do everything in my power to facilitate, expedite, and et cetera. "What have we got here, anyway, cancer cures from grapes?" I speculated.

"You don't need to know and neither do I," said Mendoza flatly. "But the Company means business now, Joseph. We must get that vine."

"We'll get it tomorrow," I told her. "Trust me."

Next day, same hour, the brothers came with hopeful smiles and a big muddy mess of a vine trailing out of their cart. Such relief! Such heartfelt praise and thanks the kindly friar showered on his obedient sons in Christ! Mendoza heard their arrival and came tearing out into the courtyard, only to pull up short with an expression of baffled rage.

THAT'S NOT THE VINE! she transmitted, with such intensity I thought for a second we were having an earthquake.

" . . . And yet, my sons, I am afraid we have not understood each other once again," I went on wearily. "It appears that, although you have brought us a whole vine, you have not brought *the* particular vine that was specifically asked for by my cousin."

"We are so sorry," replied Emidio, averting his eyes from Mendoza. "How stupid we were! But, Father, this is a very good vine. It's in much better condition than the other one and bears much prettier grapes. Also,

it was very difficult to dig it all up and we have brought it a long way. Maybe the lady will be satisfied with this vine instead?"

Mendoza was shaking her head, not trusting herself to speak, although the air around her was wavering like a mirage. Hastily I said:

"My dearest sons, I am sure it is an excellent vine, and we would not take it from your family. You must understand that it is the *other* vine we want, the very one you brought cuttings from yesterday. That vine and no other, and all of that vine. Now, you have clearly worked very hard and in good faith, so I will certainly send you home with your other pig, but you must come back tomorrow with the right vine."

The brothers looked at each other and I picked up a flash of despair from them, and some weird kind of fear too. "Yes, little Father," they replied.

But on the next day they didn't come at all.

Mendoza paced the arcade until nine in the evening, alarming the other friars. Finally I went out to her and braced myself for the blast.

"You know, you lost yourself two perfectly good pigs," she informed me through gritted teeth, "Damned lying Indians."

I shook my head. "Something's wrong here, Mendoza."

"You bet something's wrong! You've got a three-day delay on a Priority Gold."

"But there's some reason we're not getting. Something is missing from this picture . . ."

"We never should have tried to bargain with them, you know that? They offered it as a gift in the first place. We should have just taken it. Now they know it's really worth something! I'll go up there with a spade and dig the damned vine up myself, if I have to."

"No! You can't do that, not now. They'll know who took it, don't you see?"

"One more crime against the helpless Indians laid at the door of Spain. As if it mattered anymore!" Mendoza turned on her heel to stare at me. Down at the other end of the arcade one of my brother friars put his head out in discreet inquiry.

It does matter! I dropped to a subvocal hiss. It matters to them and it matters to me! I call them my beloved sons, but they know I've got the power to go up there and confiscate anything they have on any excuse at all because that's how it's always been done! Only I don't. They know Father Rubio won't do that to them. I've built up a cover identity as a kindly, honorable guy because I've got to live with these people for the next thirty years! You'll get your damn specimen and go away again into the sagebrush, but I've got a character to maintain!

My God, she sneered, He wants his little Indians to love him.

Company policy, baby. It's easier to deal with mortals when they trust

you. Something you used to understand. So just you try screwing with my cover identity, baby, just you try it and see what happens.

She widened her eyes at that, too furious for words, and I saw her knuckles go white; little chips of whitewash began falling from the walls. We both looked up at them and cooled down in a hurry.

Sorry. But I mean what I say, Mendoza. We handle this my way.

She threw her hands up in the air. *What are you going to do, then, smart guy? You have to do something.*

Day Four of the Priority Gold, and Company Directive 081244-A anxiously inquired why no progress on previous transdepartmental request for facilitation? Situation Report follows, I responded. Please stand by. Then I put on my walking sandals and set off up the canyon alone.

Before I had toiled more than halfway, though, I met Emidio coming in my direction. He didn't try to avoid me, but as he approached he looked down the canyon past me in the direction of the mission. "Good morning, little Father," he called.

"Good morning, my son."

"Is your cousin lady with you?" He dropped his voice as he drew close.

"No, my son. We are alone."

"I need to speak with you, little Father, about the grapevine." He cleared his throat. "I know the lady must be very angry, and I am sorry. I don't mean to make you angry too, little Father, because I know she is your cousin—"

"I understand, my son, believe me. And I am not angry."

"Well then." He drew a deep breath. "This is the matter. The grapevines do not belong to me, nor to my father. They belong to our grandfather Diego. And he will not let us dig up the vine the lady wants."

"Why will he not?"

"He won't tell us. He just refuses. Don't be stupid, we told him. Father Rubio has been good to us, he has treated us fairly. Look at the fine pigs he has given us, we said. He just sits in the sun and rocks himself, and refuses us. And our grandmother came and touched his feet and cried, though she didn't say anything, but he wouldn't even look at her."

"I see."

"We have said everything we could say to him, but he will not let us dig up that vine. We tried to fool the lady twice by pretending to make mistakes (and that was a sin, little Father, and I'm sorry), but it didn't work. Somehow she knew. Then our grandfather—" he paused in obvious embarrassment. "I don't know how to say this, little Father—you know the old people are superstitious and still believe foolish things—I think he somehow has the idea that your cousin lady is a *nunasis*. Please don't take this the wrong way—"

"No, no, go on—"

"We have an old story about one who walks on the hills and wears a hat like hers, you see. I know it's stupid. Even so, he won't let us dig up that vine. Now, you might say, our grandfather is only an old man and a little bit crazy now, and we're strong, so he can be put aside as though he were a little baby; but if we did that we would be breaking the commandment about honoring the old people. It seems to us that would be a worse sin than the white lady not getting what she wanted. What do you think, little Father?"

Boy oh boy. "This is very hard, my son," I said, and I meant it. "But you are right."

Emidio studied me in silence for a long moment, his eyes narrowed. "Thank you," he said at last. After another pause he added, "Is there anything we can do that will make the lady happy? She'll be angry with you, now."

I found myself laughing. "She will make my life a Purgatory, I can tell you," I said. "But I will offer it up for my sins. Go home, Emidio, and don't worry. Perhaps God will send a miracle."

I wasn't laughing when I got back to the mission, though, and when Mendoza came looking for me she saw my failure right away.

"No dice, huh?" She squinted evilly. "Well. This is no longer a matter of me and my poor little bonus now, Joseph. *The Company Wants That Vine*. I suggest you think of something fast or there are liable to be some dead Indians around here soon, pardon my indelicate phrasing."

"I'm working on it," I told her.

And I was. I went to the big leather-bound books that held the mission records. I sat down in a corner of the scriptorium and went over them in minute detail.

In 1789, there was the baptism of Diego Kasmali, age given as thirty years. In 1790, marriage to María Concepción, age not given. From 1791 through 1810, a whole string of baptisms of little Kasmalis: Agustín, Xavier, Pablo, Juan Bautista, María, Dolores, Guadalupe, Dieguito, Marta, Tomás, Luisa, Bartolomeo. First communion for Xavier Kasmali, 1796. One after the other, a string of little funerals: Agustín age two days, Pablo age three months six days, Juan Bautista age six days, María age two years . . . too sad to go on down the list, but not unusual. Confirmation for Xavier Kasmali, 1802. Xavier Kasmali married to Juana Catalina of the Dos Pueblos rancheria, age 18 years, 1812. Baptism of Emidio Kasmali, 1813. Baptism of Salvador Kasmali, 1814. Funeral of Juana Catalina, 1814. First Communions, Confirmations, Marriages, Baptisms, Last Rites . . . not a sacrament missed. Really good Catholics.

Why, there was the old, old woman, at Mass every single day of the year, rain or shine, though she was propped like a bundle of sticks in the

shadows at the back of the church. María Concepción, wife of Diego Kasmali. But Diego never, ever at Mass. Why not? On a desperate hunch I went to my transmitter and typed in a request for something unusual.

The reply came back: *Query: first please resolution Priority Gold Status? Request relates Priority*, I replied. *Resolving now. Requisition Sim ParaN Phenom re: Priority resolution?*

That gave them pause. They verified and counterverified my authority, they re-scanned the original orders and mulled over their implications. At least, I guessed they were doing that, as the blue screen flickered. Feeling I had them on the run, I pushed for a little extra, just for my own satisfaction: *Helpful Priority specify mutation. What? Why?*

Pause while they verified me again, then the bright letters crawled on-screen in a slow response:

Patent Black Elysium.

I fell back laughing, though it wasn't exactly funny. The rest of the message followed in a rapid burst: *S-P Requisition approved. Specify Tech support?*

I told them what I needed.

Estimate resolution time Priority Gold?

I told them how long it would take.

Expecting full specimen consign & report then, was the reply, and they signed off.

"Why don't they ever put convenient handles on these things?" grumbled Mendoza. She had one end of the transport trunk and a shovel; I had the other end of the trunk and the other shovel. It was long after midnight and we were struggling up the rocky defile that led to the Kasmali residence.

"Too much T-Field drag," I explained.

"Well, you would think that an all-powerful cabal of scientists and businessmen, with advance knowledge of every event in recorded history *and* infinite time in which to take every possible advantage of said events, *and* every possible technological resource at their command, *and* unlimited wealth—" Mendoza shifted the trunk again and we went on—"you'd think they could devise something as simple as a recessed handle."

"They tried it. The recess cuts down on the available transport space inside," I told her.

"You're kidding me."

"No. I was part of a test shipment. Damn thing got me right in the third cervical vertebra."

"I might have known there'd be a reason."

"The Company has a reason for everything, Mendoza."

We came within earshot of the house, so conversation ended. There were three big dogs in the yard before the door. One slept undisturbed,

but two put up their heads and began to growl. We set down the trunk: I opened it and from the close-packed contents managed to prise out the Hush Unit. The bigger of the dogs got to his feet, preparing to bark.

I switched on the unit. Good dog, what a sleepy doggie, he fell over with a woof and did not move again. The other dog dropped his head on his paws. Dog Number Three would not wake at all now, nor would any of the occupants of the house, not while the Hush Field was being generated.

I carried the unit up to the house and left it by the dogs, Mendoza dragging the trunk after me. We removed the box of golden altar vessels and set off up the hill with it.

The amazing mutated vine was pretty sorry-looking now, with most of its branches clipped off in the attempt to appease Mendoza. I hoped to God their well-meaning efforts hadn't killed it. Mendoza must have been thinking the same thing, but she just shrugged grimly. We began to dig.

We made a neat hole, small but very deep, just behind the trunk and angled slightly under it. There was no way to hide our disturbance of the earth, but fortunately the ground had already been so spaded up and trampled over that our work shouldn't be that obvious.

"How deep does this have to be?" I panted when we had gone about six feet and I was in the bottom passing spadefuls up to Mendoza.

"Not much deeper; I'd like it buried well below the root ball." She leaned in and peered.

"Well, how deep is that?" Before she could reply my spade hit something with a metallic clank. We halted. Mendoza giggled nervously.

"Jesus, don't tell me there's *already* buried treasure down there!"

I scraped a little with the spade. "There's something like a hook," I said. "And something else." I got the spade under it and launched it up out of the hole with one good heave. The whole mass fell on the other side of the dirt heap, out of my view. "It looked kind of round," I remarked.

"It looks kind of like a hat—" Mendoza told me cautiously, bending down and turning it over. Abruptly she yelled and danced back from it. I scrambled up out of the hole to see what was going on.

It was a hat, all right, or what was left of it; one of the hard-cured leather kind Spain had issued to her soldiers in the latter half of the last century. I remembered seeing them on the presidio personnel. Beside the hat, where my spade-toss had dislodged it, was the head that had been wearing it. Only a brown skull now, the eyes blind with black earth. Close to it was the hilt of a sword, the metallic thing I'd hit.

"Oh, gross!" Mendoza wrung her hands.

"Alas, poor Yorick," was all I could think of to say.

"Oh, God, how disgusting. Is the rest of him down there?"

I peered down into the hole. I could see a jawbone and pieces of what might have been cavalry boots. "Looks like it, I'm afraid."

"What do you suppose he's doing down there?" Mendoza fretted, from behind the handkerchief she had clapped over her mouth and nose.

"Not a damn thing nowadays," I guessed, doing a quick scan of the bones. "Take it easy: no pathogens left. This guy's been dead a long time."

"Sixty years, by any chance?" Mendoza's voice sharpened.

"They must have planted him with the grapevine," I agreed. In the thoughtful silence that followed I began to snicker. I couldn't help myself. I leaned back and had myself a nice sprawling guffaw.

"I fail to see what's so amusing," observed Mendoza acidly.

"Sorry. Sorry. I was just wondering: do you suppose you could cause a favorable mutation in something by planting a dead Spaniard under it?"

"Of course not, you idiot, not unless his sword was radioactive or something."

"No, of course not. What about those little wild yeast spores in the bloom on the grapes, though? You think they might be influenced somehow by the close proximity of a gentleman of Old Castile?"

"What are you talking about?" Mendoza took a step closer.

"This isn't a cancer cure, you know," I waved my hand at the vinestock, black against the stars. "I found out why the Company is so eager to get hold of your Favorable Mutation, kid. This is the grape that makes Black Elysium."

"The dessert wine?" Mendoza cried.

"The very expensive dessert wine. The hallucinogenic controlled substance dessert wine. The absinthe of the twenty-fourth century. The one the Company holds the patent on. That stuff. Yeah."

Stunned silence from my fellow immortal creature. I went on:

"I was just thinking, you know, about all those decadent technocrats sitting around in the Future getting bombed on an elixir produced from . . ."

"So it gets discovered here, in 1844," said Mendoza at last. "It isn't a designed mutation at all. And the wild spores somehow came from . . .?"

"But nobody else will ever know the truth, because we're removing every trace of this vine from the knowledge of mortal men, see?" I explained. "Root and branch and all."

"I'd sure better get that bonus," Mendoza reflected.

"Don't push your luck. You aren't supposed to know." I took my shovel and clambered back into the hole. "Come on, let's get the rest of him out of here. The show must go on."

Two hours later there was a tidy heap of brown bones and rusted steel moldering away in a new hiding place, and a tidy sum in gold plate occupying the former burial site. We filled in the hole, set up the rest of the equipment we'd brought, tested it, camouflaged it, turned it on and hurried away back down the canyon to the mission, taking the Hush Unit with us. I made it in time for Matins.

News travels fast in a small town. By nine there were Indians, and some of the *Gente de Razón* too, running in from all directions to tell us that the Blessed Virgin had appeared in the Kasmalis' garden. Even if I hadn't known already, I would have been tipped off by the fact that old María Concepción did not show up for morning Mass.

By the time we got up there, the bishop and I and all my fellow friars and Mendoza, a cloud of dust hung above the dirt track from all the traffic. The Kasmalis' tomatoes and corn had been trampled by the milling crowd. People ran everywhere, waving pieces of grapevine; the other plants had been stripped as bare as the special one. The rancheros watched from horseback, or urged their mounts closer across the careful beds of peppers and beans.

Around the one vine the family had formed a tight circle. Some of them watched Emidio and Salvador, who were digging frantically, already about five feet down in the hole; others stared unblinking at the floating image of the Virgin of Guadalupe who smiled upon them from midair above the vine. She was complete in every detail, nicely three-dimensional and accompanied by heavenly music. Actually it was a long tape loop of Ralph Vaughn Williams's *Variations on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*, which nobody would recognize because it hadn't been composed yet.

"Little Father!" One of the wives caught me by my robe. "It's the Mother of God! She told us to dig up the vine, she said there was treasure buried underneath!"

"Has she told you anything else?" I inquired, making the Sign of the Cross. My brother friars were falling to their knees in raptures, beginning to sing the *Ave Maria*; the bishop was sobbing.

"No, not since this morning," the wife told me. "Only the beautiful music has gone on and on."

Emidio looked up and noticed me for the first time. He stopped shoveling for a moment, staring at me, and a look of dark speculation crossed his face. Then his shovel was moving again, clearing away the earth, and more earth, and more earth.

At my side, Mendoza turned away her face in disgust. But I was watching the old couple, who stood a little way back from the rest of the family. They clung to each other in mute terror and had no eyes for the smiling Virgin. It was the bottom of the ever-deepening hole they watched, as birds watch a snake.

And I watched them. Old Diego was bent and toothless now, but sixty years ago he'd had teeth, all right; sixty years ago his race hadn't yet learned never to fight back against its conquerors. María Concepción, what had she been sixty years ago when those vines were planted? Not a dried-up shuffling old thing back then. She might have been a beauty, and maybe a careless beauty.

The old bones and the rusting steel could have told you, sixty years ago. Had he been a handsome young captain with smooth ways, or just a soldier who took what he wanted? Whatever he'd been, or done, he'd wound up buried under that vine, and only Diego and María knew he was there. All those years, through the children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, he'd been there. Diego never coming to Mass because of a sin he couldn't confess. María never missing Mass, praying for someone.

Maybe that was the way it had happened. Nobody would ever tell the story, I was fairly sure. But it was clear that Diego and María, alone of all those watching, did not expect to see treasure come out of that hole in the ground.

So when the first glint of gold appeared, and then the chalice and altar plate were brought up, their old faces were a study in confusion.

"The Treasure!" cried Salvador. "Look!"

And the rancheros spurred their horses through the crowd to get a better look, lashing the Indians out of the way; but I touched the remote hidden in my sleeve and the Blessed Virgin spoke, in a voice as sweet and immortal as a synthesizer:

"This, my beloved children, is the altar plate that was lost from the church at San Carlos Borromeo, long ago in the time of the pirates. My Beloved Son has caused it to be found here as a sign to you all that ALL SINS ARE FORGIVEN!"

I touched the remote again and the Holy Apparition winked out like a soap bubble, and the beautiful music fell silent.

Old Diego pushed his way forward to the hole and looked in. There was nothing else there in the hole now, nothing at all. María came timidly to his side and she looked in too. They remained there staring a long time, unnoticed by the mass of the crowd, who were watching the dispute that had already erupted over the gold.

The bishop had pounced on it like a duck on a june bug, as they say, asserting the right of Holy Mother Church to her lost property. Emidio and Salvador had let it be snatched from them with hard patient smiles. One of the *Gente de Razón* actually got off his horse to tell the bishop that the true provenance of the items had to be decided by the authorities in Mexico City, and until they could be contacted the treasure had better be kept under lock and key at the alcalde's house. Blessed Virgin? Yes, there had seemed to be an apparition of some kind; but then again, perhaps it had been a trick of the light.

The argument moved away down the hill—the bishop had a good grip on the gold and kept walking with it, so almost everyone had to follow him. I went to stand beside Diego and María, in the ruins of their garden.

"She forgave us," whispered Diego.

"A great weight of sin has been lifted from you today, my children," I

told them. "Rejoice, for Christ loves you both. Come to the church with me now and I will celebrate a special Mass in your honor."

I led them away with me, one on either arm. Unseen behind us, Mendoza advanced on the uprooted and forgotten vine with a face like a lioness kept from her prey.

Well, the old couple made out all right, anyway. I saw to it that they got new grapevines and food from the mission supplies to tide the family over until their garden recovered. Within a couple of years they passed away, one after the other, and were buried reasonably near one another in the consecrated ground of the mission cemetery, in which respect they were luckier than the unknown captain from Castile, or wherever he'd come from.

They never got the golden treasure, but being Indians there had never been any question that they would. Their descendants lived on and multiplied in the area, doing particularly well after the coming of the Yankees, who (to the mortification of the *Gente de Razón*) couldn't tell an Indian from a Spanish Mexican and lumped them all together under the common designation of Greaser, treating one no worse than the other.

Actually, I never kept track of what happened to the gold. The title dispute dragged on for years, I think, with the friars swearing there had been a miracle and the rancheros swearing there hadn't been. The gold may have been returned to Carmel, or it may have gone to Mexico City, or it may have gone into a trunk underneath the alcalde's bed. The bishop died and the Yankees came and were the new conquerors, and maybe nothing ever did get resolved either way.

But Mendoza got her damned vine and her bonus, so she was as happy as she ever is. The Company got its patent on Black Elysium secured. I lived on at the mission for years and years before (apparently) dying of venerable old age and (apparently) being buried in the same cemetery as Diego and María. God forgave us all, I guess, and I moved on to less pleasant work.

Sometimes, when I'm in that part of the world, I stop in as a tourist and check out my grave. It's the nicest of the many I've had, except maybe for that crypt in Hollywood. Well, well; life goes on.

Mine does, anyway. ●



CURSE OF THE BANDERSNATCH'S WIFE

Bruce Boston

She gired mimsy youth with him
and others of his frumious ilk,
like brillig and the slithy toves,
the ill-beholden Prince of Silk.

Despite the joys of frabjous love,
and uffish evenings spent in thrall,
she can't be sure where Bander is,
nor even when he'll come to call!

On tulgey nights the Jabberwock
runs chortling in the forest prime,
galumphing past the sith and sledge
beneath a moon of blevous lime.

One, two. One, two. Sleep has fled
—whenever Jabber burbles nigh!—
she counts the gimble stars by pairs,
outgraves her reach of beamish sky.

She jubs the gate, numbs the lights,
alone with vorpall sword she waits.
With eyes aflame, jaws that crack,
the Jabberwock calloohs her fate.

And so a manxome life she leads,
gloomed in asperants and bleers.
Even Bander's snick-snack songs
could never reliquate her tears!

She gired mimsy youth with him
and others of his frumious kind,
like brillig and the slithy toves,
the ill-bespoken Prince of Wine.

S.N. Dyer

The Nostalgonauts

In a moment that many people can relate to, S.N. Dyer gives the high school in-crowd the scathing reward it so justly deserves . . .

"So, you wanna go to the prom?"
"Why?" I asked. "Like, I thought the Chess Club was going to hang on Geek-web."
It was going to be a worldwide hook-up of dateless losers. You can't say we don't know how to have a good time.
"I just think I ought to be there," Gar said. "At the prom." He shrugged. I shrugged.

We were on the steps of the old Carnegie-built library—its motto: *One hundred years, nothing controversial yet*—and were watching the church across the street. A wedding. That meant the possibility of time travelers. Or not. Entertaining either way.

"So why me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why not Net Girl?"

"She's too popular."

True. She's only a junior and already has five electronic boyfriends. She also weighs three hundred pounds. But a hell of a website.

"Besides," he said. "You clean up nice. Remember Halloween? You were hot on Halloween."

There was action inside the church now, people opening the doors, spilling outside. We craned forward.

The happy couple emerged. Hands paused, loaded with rice . . .

Everyone looked around. The question on everyone's lips: Would *they* be there? Would the happy couple, a quarter-century older, time travel back to reexperience this day of joy? Gar and I crossed our fingers sarcastically. Because if they didn't show, it meant they were either dead,

or divorced, or dirt poor. Talk about killing the festivities by your absence.

"Any bets?" I asked.

"Loser buys at T-Bell? I say they'll come."

Suddenly the air by a late-model Honda began to crackle and fluoresce. A middle-aged duo clicked into focus, promptly waving at the newlyweds. A collectively held breath exhaled in unison. The couple waved back, and everyone cheered. From across the street, we joined in. Let's hear it for lasting marital bliss.

And then, just as suddenly, the old pair's thirty seconds were up, they clicked out—and here came more travelers. The cheery offspring. Five of them, ranging in age from near-teen to must-have-been-pregnant-on-the-big-day. The crowd went wild.

"Hot damn," I said. More life-affirming than an entire week of *Nick at Nite*.

"So, will you?"

"On Halloween I was a vampire in black velvet and red satin."

"Works for me," said Gar.

So we shook on it, and headed to T-Bell.

"You know how the lights go weird right before the dumdums show?"

When time travelers first started showing up they were called *phantoms*. When scientists figured out what they were, the media called them *time tourists*, or *nostalginauts*. We stuck with *phantom*, pronounced *phan-dumb*, and finally just *dumdums*.

I mean, what a phenomenally stupid invention. Time travel that only takes you twenty-five years into the past, lasts half a minute, and you're insubstantial too. It makes a quest for rubber beverage containers look intelligent. Eyelash massagers. Trampoline deodorizers. Computer ventriloquists.

"But it is important," Gar kept saying. "It means Time is quantized. So what if the first level is trivial. . . . Maybe you can visit longer levels."

"Then we'd have boring visitors from the far future, not just people with anniversaries and reunions."

"Maybe guys from further out dress so they won't scare us or give anything away. Or the future scientists could be viewing, oh, australopithecines or trilobites or the big asteroid crash. But it means We Understand Time. Unified Theory of Everything."

I rolled my eyes toward the ceiling. Gar has a lot of emotion invested in time travel. He's convinced he's going to invent it. That's okay with me. He'll need something to keep him busy next fall when he's at MIT and doesn't have his geeky pals from the Chess Club to keep him real. (And no, we don't play chess. We call it that to scare away stupid people. It works.)

A couple of classmates of the Neanderthal persuasion stopped by our table. "Hey dorks, drowning your sorrows 'cause you don't have prom dates?"

"No," I said. "We're drowning our sorrows because it's lonely being the only ones in town with active synaptic potentials."

"Oooh, big words. I'm sooo scared!"

The bigger one tore open a couple of hot sauce packets and smeared them on my softaco. Ha ha.

I caught the moron's eye, grinned, grabbed half a dozen more packets, added them on, and took a nice happy bite.

The Neanderthals turned pale and left.

"I can't believe it," Gar said. "They're scared of spicy food!"

Good thing I hang on the Weird Cuisine SIG. And it's why I have to leave town. I want to find out if Thai restaurants really do exist in nature. But I went back to the problem at hand.

"So why are you set on the senior prom, Gar? It's not like you've ever been to a game or bought a yearbook or anything."

"Last week, something weird happened. I was in my room thinking about Time, and how the lights before the dumdums come are kind of like when I put my metal-rimmed *Pinky and the Brain* mug in the microwave, and my jaw was hanging open really stupid . . . and I realized there was someone else in my room. A dumdummy."

"Wrong address?"

He shook his head. "He was looking at me, and smiling." He shuddered. Our crowd wasn't used to real smiles.

He was right. If true, it was most definitely weird.

"Maybe you were about to be murdered?"

"Yeah, of course, that's it. And now I'm dead."

Because that's the only non-nostalgia use for time travel so far—checking out unsolved crimes. Deterrent value is zero. Face it. If a dumdummy shows up while you're busy ventilating a little old lady with an icepick, you don't say, *Whoa, I'm caught*. You say *Cool, I got away with it for twenty-five years!* Which to your average criminal and your average teenager is like forever.

"Okay, let's go with this as your grand moment of revelation. Kekule and the snake. Newton and the fig."

I wasn't going to let Gar's ego get any bigger. So his IQ was bigger than the gross national product of Chechnya. He was still a dateless nerd. A laughingstock. A loser whose best friends were so socially inept they could really only talk to him via modem. And of course me, the rebel—without a Santa Claus. The girl for whom the guidance counselors had made up a stamp that said *bad attitude*.

"You going to remember your old friends when you've got a Nobel Prize in every room?"

And then something happened. The air fluoresced and a dumdummy appeared at the next table. And stared at us, staring back, for the longest thirty seconds of my life, before disappearing again.

"Wow," I said. "Maybe I should save the hot sauce wrappers. They may be worth something someday."

Mom was in the kitchen doing her June Cleaver thing. "Hey Mom!" I yelled, plopping down in front of the TV and going right to Home Shopping so I could make fun of the boomer collectibles. Eighty bucks for a model of a bicycle. "Hey Mom, can I go to the prom tomorrow night?"

I was sort of permanently grounded since I called the principal a *neototalitarian babbittoid*. I would have been expelled too, but someone finally explained it to him and it just wasn't bad enough.

A fossilized survivor of the Partridge Family was shilling vinyl souvenirs. Makes you proud to be American.

"The prom?"

I jumped. Mom was right behind me. She'd run out from the kitchen, hands still covered in flour, and was wide-eyed like she was going to cry.

"The prom," I said. "It's not like Lassie just came home."

She started nervously wiping her hands on her apron. "We'll run out right now and get your hair done and a dress and . . ."

"Hey, it's just Gar, and I'll wear my black dress."

Her face fell. I almost felt bad. I hadn't realized the way the word *prom* would hit her. Stimulus response. For one microsecond I was a normal daughter, wanting the normal world of dresses and boys and family, not a changeling who wanted to go to film school and raise tattoos.

They really did get my blood tested once. They were that convinced I'd been switched in the nursery.

"So can I go?"

She sighed. "Go. Do what you want. Remember, there are only seventy-two Family Shaming Days before you go away to college."

"Thanks, Mom. When you make a joke like that, I almost believe we're related."

She flinched, started back to the kitchen, then turned.

"You know what I hope?" she said. "I hope you show up at the prom—your future self, I mean—and I hope you tell yourself what a mess you're going to make of your life. I hope to God you straighten out."

And then I shuddered. Because I thought of all those old farts at their twenty-fifth reunion, coming back en masse to look at the glory days of the prom—anyone who wasn't dead or broke or a total reject—and I didn't want it. I didn't want to be one of the jerks smiling and waving and holding snapshots of big families and big cars and big houses.

"I wouldn't do that," I muttered. "I wouldn't do anything so—so ordinary."

On the other hand, if I did feel like I had to revisit my prom, maybe I'd be cool enough to do it dressed entirely in vinyl Partridge Family souvenirs.

No corsage, but he brought me a red carnation that went with my color scheme. We started out at the Chess Club alternate prom party. Eight people, seven computers, a lot of Doritos, and two bottles of Annie Green Springs.

"God, you both look great," said Net Girl. "I love the tux. You two could be Fred and Ginger."

"Yeah, the Transylvanian dance team," said Jean-Luc. "Make it so." Poor guy had three strikes against him: he was brilliant, he was going bald at seventeen, and he liked to write philosophical essays in Klingon. But there was something in his eyes I wasn't accustomed to . . .

Great. I was now the sex goddess of the pathetic loser crowd.

"We'll be back after the dance," said Gar. "Assuming we're not hospitalized or murdered or anything."

Then we gritted our collective dentition and drove to the school gym. "I couldn't believe it when I heard you were coming," said Mrs. Trout, my homeroom teacher. She hated my guts. It was mutual. "I should have known you'd pull something like this."

"It's my best dress, ma'am," I said.

We didn't dance. I don't know how, and Gar looked dangerous to my podiatric integrity. So we stood by the wall, occasionally shouted something sarcastic at each other over the din, and were bored to tears.

Until the dumdums started to appear. You can get a lot of mileage watching eighteen-year-olds confront their forty-three-year-old selves. Like they never realized they'd get that old. And the dumdums thinking they still looked buff or cool, not realizing they were just ancient. Embarrassing.

Most of them were holding little signs or pictures of all the detritus they'd accumulated. The pictures of families, mansions, and what we could only assume were expensive cars.

I made a gagging sound. I couldn't imagine anything worse than knowing where you were going to live, how many kids you'd have. It would be like trying to read an Agatha Christie when you've already snuck a look at the last chapter.

Gar kept looking around. I guess he thought he'd show up with his Nobel around his neck. Maybe a physics groupie on each arm. It could happen. Sooner or later he'd have to grow into his face.

The class president stood at the mike and tapped it until everyone quieted down. He'd just seen his own red-nosed future self holding pictures of a car dealership and what was either a second wife or a very inappropriately clad daughter. He was primed.

The pitiful country band quieted down. Fine with me. You ever heard redneck rap?

"Now it's time to announce the Prom King and Queen . . ."

And he named us.

"Oh hell," I said. I didn't like the sound of this.

We found ourselves being pushed up to the stage. The president and my homeroom teacher pulled us up. "Your future self hasn't appeared yet, has she?" she sneered. Obviously meaning: because you couldn't afford it, or you died of a drug overdose in a gutter, or you're embarrassed by your lack of success.

"Hell no," I said. "Think I'd want to relive this boring and now humiliating piece of shit night?"

"Detention until the end of school for swearing, dear," she hissed.

The class president stuck crowns on our heads, ducked back quickly, and then the pies started to fly. But I'd been alerted, and dove behind Miss Trout, pushing her into the line of fire. Detention, hell—now it would be suspension.

Poor Gar wiped banana cream from his glasses—the idiots didn't know you were supposed to use shaving cream—and staggered to the microphone.

"You are all . . . infantile," he said. His voice was cracking, but it got stronger as he went. I stepped forward to put a hand on his shoulder. I felt kind of bad I hadn't had time to warn him.

"You're all unoriginal, boring, hopelessly conventional bourgeoisie."

"Yeah!" a Neanderthal shouted, and the football team whooped. They weren't sure what it meant, but if the four-eyed technonerd was against it, they were for it.

"And it's really all just jealousy. Because I'm leaving this hick town and *you'll* all stay, just live and die here and no one will ever remember you. But *I'm* going to be important. . . ."

"America's Most Wanted Dork!"

"Good one," I shouted. "Who writes your jokes, Flipper?"

"I'm going to contribute to human knowledge, and you'll just contribute to . . . to your own IRAs."

Gar never thought well on the fly. I should have anticipated the need for a retribution speech.

"And you'll only be remembered as the assholes who made fun of me, like the ones who laughed at Darwin and suppressed Galileo. . . ."

And that's when it got weirder, as everyone realized that attendance in the room had doubled. There were future people everywhere, looking around, recording, remembering. And all the dumdums were focused on Gar, except when they were sneering at the other prom-goers.

It was too funny. I couldn't stop laughing. They'd been trying to make fun of us and now they would be famous as the Village of Short-sighted

Idiots. Spending the rest of their lives as the laughingstocks of history, trying to live it down. And in the process, no doubt, becoming even more militantly short-sighted and closeminded.

I loved it. Even as I pitied the next generation in this crappy town.

And yeah, I even caught sight of Grownup Gar the Tenured Professor. He did grow into his face, and there *are* Nobel Groupies.

I stumbled away out of the crowd. My own cozy footnote in history assured, maybe, as Gar's vampira prom date. But he didn't need me now. He was basking in the attention of the future's intelligentsia, and the air that was thick with *I Told You So*.

I walked out into the parking lot, breathing in the relatively fresh air, and leaned against the wall. I'd probably have to bum a ride to the Chess Club party, or walk. I had a feeling Gar was about to go home and pound out a theory of time. Excuse me, Time.

Something crackled out of the corner of my eye, and I found myself looking into my own eyes. Crow's feet, middle-aged spread, and it seemed I was apparently doomed to another quarter century of bad hair days and no fashion sense.

But I still had my patented sardonic grin, as my future self flashed up something white.

"Not pictures," I moaned.

No. It was an index card. My handwriting didn't seem to have improved either. I'd scrawled, "IT HASN'T BEEN DULL."

I shrugged at me and disappeared.

It hasn't been dull.

Cool. I can live with that. ●

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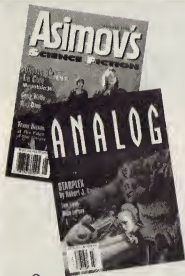


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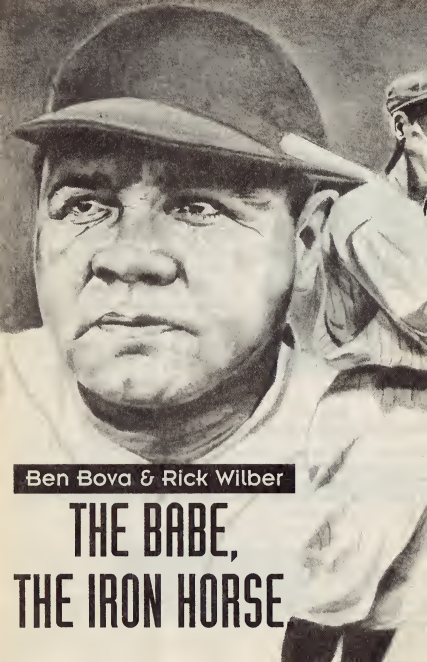
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HI745



Ben Bova & Rick Wilber

THE BABE, THE IRON HORSE



AND MR. MCGILLICUDDY

Just in time for spring training, two power hitters return to our pages. Ben Bova not only writes about the future, he has helped create it. The author of more than eighty-five futuristic novels and nonfiction books, he has been involved in science and high technology since the very beginnings of the space program. President Emeritus of the National Space Society and a past president of SFWA, Dr. Bova is a frequent commentator on radio and television, and a widely popular lecturer. He has also been an award-winning editor and an executive in the aerospace industry. Rick Wilber has sold about a hundred short stories and poems, and over one thousand nonfiction articles. He is the SF reviewer for the *St. Petersburg Times*, and he edits the *Fiction Quarterly* for the *Tampa Tribune*. Mr. Wilber is a faculty member of the School of Mass Communications at the University of South Florida. He is also administrator of the Isaac Asimov Award for excellence in undergraduate writing that is co-sponsored by the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts and by this magazine.

Illustration by Steve Cavalla

The Iron Horse uncoiled, bringing the hips through first and then following with the shoulders, those quick wrists, that snap as the bat hit the ball.

It was just batting practice, but Lou felt wonderful, like a kid again, with no pain, with the body doing what it had always done so well. He had no idea what was going on, how he'd gotten here, what had happened. He almost didn't want to think about it, for fear it might all be some hallucination, some death dream, his mind going crazy in the last moments, trying to make the dying easier for him.

There was a sharp crack as he sent a towering shot toward the center field wall in Yankee Stadium, over the wall for sure, sailing high and deep. He stood there and watched this one go. It would be nearly five hundred feet before it landed, he guessed.

But the Negro ballplayer roaming around out in center shagging flies did it again, turned his back to the plate and raced away, heading straight toward the wall, full tilt. There was, surprisingly, a lot of room now in center, and the Negro had blazing speed. He somehow managed to nearly catch up with the ball, and then, amazingly, reached straight out in front to make a basket catch over his shoulder. It was a beautiful catch, an amazing one, really—the large number 24 on the man's back was all that Lou could see for a moment as the ball was caught.

Then the Negro turned and fired a strike toward second, where Charlie Gehringer waited for it, catching it on one long hop and sweeping the bag as if there were a runner sliding in. Gehringer whooped as he made the

tag, as impressed as everyone else with the center fielder's skill. Then he rolled the ball in toward the batting practice pitcher.

On the mound, taking a ball out of the basket and pounding it into his catcher's mitt, Yogi just smiled. Like everyone else, he didn't understand how this was happening, how they all had come to be here—but he really didn't care. When he let that last pitch go he'd of sworn he was in Yankee Stadium somehow, but then, looking at Willie chase it down in dead center, it looked for all the world like the Polo Grounds. Yogi looked in toward the plate and could see Coogan's Bluff in the background.

It didn't make any kind of sense, but Yogi just decided he wasn't going to worry about it. He and the other fellows were having a good time, that was all. And he'd been right, he figured with pride. It wasn't over till it was over.

He took a quick look around. There was Willie Mays out there in center, and Gehringer at second, and Ted out in left. Next to the cage, swinging a couple of bats, getting loose to hit next, was Scooter himself, happy as a clam. There were great players everywhere, and more showing up all the time, walking in from the clubhouse or just suddenly out there, in the field, taking infield or shagging flies.

Yogi counted heads. Where, he wondered, was the Babe? You'd think he'd be here, joking with the guys, taking a few of those thunderous cuts. That'd sure be fine, Yogi thought, to throw a few in to the Babe and then watch the ball fly out of the ballpark.

Well, maybe later. For now, Yogi figured he had no complaints coming. He went into a half-wind, took a short stride toward the plate, making sure to get the pitch up over that open corner of the screen that protected him from shots up the middle, and threw another straight ball in to Lou. Imagine, he thought, me, throwing batting practice to Gehrig. The line drive back at him almost took his head off.

In the stands, up a dozen rows near the back of the box seats, an old, fat, sad-faced Babe Ruth sat in a wide circle of peanut shells. He was eating hot dogs now, and drinking Knickerbocker beer, watching batting practice, not saying much. He knew a few of the guys out there, but couldn't place the others. There was a sharp clap of thunder, and the Babe wondered if the day might be rained out. Low dark clouds circled the field, swirling and rumbling with menace.

Next to him sat white-haired, saintly Connie Mack, producing hot dog after hot dog as Ruth shoved them into that maw and chewed them down. Ruth was perspiring in a heavy flannel suit. Mack, slim as a willow, looked coolly comfortable in his customary dark suit, starched collar, and straw boater.

"George," Mack said, "isn't that about enough for now?"

Ruth never stopped chewing, but managed to say, "Mr. Mack, I ain't

got any idea how long it's been since I sat in a ballyard and ate a hot dog, and I also ain't got any idea how long this is gonna last. Them clouds move in and this thing'll be a rain-out. I'm eating while I can, you know?"

"George, I understand. Truly I do. But I really don't think it will rain, and I'd hoped that you might want to get out there and take a few cuts, meet the other fellows. There are some very fine players out there."

Mack pointed toward the infield. "That fellow there at third is Brooks Robinson, as fine a glove man as you'll ever see at that position. And at shortstop, that young, lanky fellow is Marty Marion, one of the slickest men to ever play short. And there, in the outfield, is Willie Mays, the Negro who just caught that ball. Next to him, in left, is Ted Williams. . . ."

"I know him, the Williams kid," said the Babe between bites. "Helluva young hitter. Got a real future."

"Indeed," said Mack. "And at second is Charlie Gehringer, you know him, too. And there are others showing up all the time. Look, there's Dominic DiMaggio, and Hoot Evers. These are good men, Babe, all of them, good men. You really should make the decision to join them, before it's too late."

"Who's that catching?"

"Fellow named Wilber. Del Wilber. A journeyman, but with a fine mind, Babe. He'll make a fine manager someday, and he has a good, strong arm. He'll cut people down at second if we need him to play."

"And pitching?"

"That's a coach throwing batting practice, Yogi Berra. Another good catcher, too, in his day. He can help us if it comes to that. And warming up out there in the bullpen is Sandy Koufax, he's our starter. You should see his curveball, George, it's really something."

"You know," Mack said, "you belong out there. You really do. You should be loosening up a bit, running around out in the outfield, a few windsprints perhaps, instead of," he handed the Babe a napkin, "this."

The Babe shook his head. "I gave all that up a few years back. I appreciate it, Mr. Mack. But the thing is, it's like this, I hung 'em up, Mr. Mack, and that's all there is to it. Now if you need a *manager* . . . you know, I was just getting the hang of it in '35."

Mack smiled. "I'm afraid that the managerial position is filled for now, George. But, there *is* a roster spot for you, I'd love to have you on my team. You could play in the outfield for us, or even pitch. I think you'd enjoy it."

The Babe held out his hand, and Mack started to shake it, thinking the deal was done, and quite early, too. Then he realized what the Babe really wanted, sighed to himself, and obligingly placed another hot dog into it.

"Maybe in a little while, Mr. Mack," Ruth said, taking a huge first bite. "But right now, if you don't mind, I'd like to just sit and watch Lou and these other guys. The Dutchman, he looks fine, don't he? Always was a

sweet hitter, got those wrists, you know? Snap on that ball and away she goes."

There was another sharp crack as Gehrig sent one deep to center. Mays drifted under this one, waited, then made a basket catch to some general laughter from the other players. What a showboat, that Mays.

"He's something, ain't he, that boy?" said the Babe. "Remember Josh Gibson, Mr. Mack? Now, *there* was a ballplayer. Boy, I tell you, he could he hit that thing a ton! Played against him once or twice in exhibitions."

But Mack wasn't listening to the Babe, who, Mack figured, would just have to make his decision later. For now, Mack had heard the clatter of a dying engine out in the parking lot and rose to head out that way, excusing himself absentmindedly and leaving six more hot dogs with Ruth—enough, Mack hoped, to tide the Babe over for a few minutes.

Although he carried a cane, the elderly Mack seemed almost to glide along the row of seats and out to the steps that led up from the box seats to the back ramp of the stadium. From there, he watched as an old 1937 Ford bus clanged and popped its way into the empty parking lot. There was a cloud of blue smoke and a loud bang as the engine finally seized up entirely and the bus shuddered to a stop.

Mack frowned slightly, then watched with interest as the front door of the bus creaked open halfway. A hand reached out and tugged, tugged again, and the door creaked open another foot or so. People started to emerge.

First off the bus was Leo Durocher, scowling and cursing, five o'clock shadow already darkening his jaw. Pushing him from behind was Pete Rose, who in turn was being pushed by Ty Cobb, who threatened to spike Rose if he didn't hurry it up.

A quiet, scared-looking Joe Jackson got off next. Then came Billy Martin, Buck Weaver, Bill Terry, John "Bad Dude" Sterns, Carl Mays, Eddie Stanky, Sal Ivars, Bill Lee, Bob Gibson, Rogers Hornsby, Thurman Munson. This was a tough bunch of guys.

Charlie Comiskey had driven the bus, and was still on it, arguing with someone while the others stood around outside, waiting.

"Damn it, we're here. You have to get off now. We can settle all this later."

"Mierda," said a voice from the back of the bus, which was enveloped in a cloud of cigar smoke. "You are all the same, always, you colonialists, always demanding that we do your bidding. Well, I tell you this, I will get off when I am damn well ready to get off, and no sooner. Comprende?"

"Get your ass out here, Fidel," shouted Rose. Then he turned to Durocher and added, "Damn commies. All the same, I swear."

Durocher nodded, but added, "I played winter ball down there in Cuba a couple of times, Petey. Great times. Food was good, women were fast, and the players were pretty damn decent. Them Cubanos aren't too bad,

really. But this guy? Shit. Nothing but bitching for twenty miles of bumpy roads getting here."

Durocher looked over at the ballpark. "Where the hell is 'here,' anyway?"

"Fostoria, Ohio, Leo," said Comiskey, giving up on Castro for the moment and stepping down from the bus. "Nice little park. Seats about a thousand. Built in the early twenties. Two shower heads. Cold water. A few nails to hang your street clothes on. You'll love the accommodations."

"Oh, Christ," said Bill Terry. "I played in this park. It's got a godforsakin' skin infield, and some fucking mountains in the outfield. What a hellhole. Jesus, the Ohio State League. I don't fuckin' believe it."

Comiskey just smiled and pointed toward the door that said "Visitors" in faded black paint. The players headed that way, all except for Castro, who still wouldn't budge.

"Hey, Fidel," said Rose, "I hear Lou Gehrig's in there taking batting practice. If you can move your fat Cuban ass outa there you can pitch to him today. Wouldn't that be something, striking out Gehrig?"

There was a rustle from the back of the bus, and then Castro's head appeared out the top half of one cracked window. "Gehrig? Is this true?"

"Swear to God, Fidel. Swear to God. The Iron Horse himself. And in his prime."

Fidel looked at Comiskey, who simply nodded. It was true. "Well, then," said Castro. "This is a different circumstance, and I have always been a realist, one ready to meet changing conditions."

"Yeah, right," said Rose with a chuckle, "I bet that's it, all right. Changing conditions. C'mon, Fidel, quit your bitching and haul it out of there. We got a game to play."

Castro stared for a few quiet moments at the grinning Rose. There were things to be done with people like him. But not here, not now. Not with Gehrig himself inside, warming up. Such an oportunidad! It was not to be missed.

And so, a few minutes later, while Connie Mack watched with a sad smile from the upper deck, the President for Life and the gambler walked behind the Black Sox owner toward the clubhouse door, and the field, and the game.

It was a battle, right from the outset. Koufax was blazing fast, and his curve looked as if it were dropping off a table. But Ty Cobb chopped one of those curves into the dirt along the third-base line and beat it out for a single. Then Rogers Hornsby slapped a Texas Leaguer that dropped between Gehrig, Gehringer, and Aaron for a double while Cobb raced home with the first run. Koufax then fanned Ducky Medwick and Bill Terry to end the inning with Hornsby stranded on second.

As the players trooped in from the dugout, Gehrig saw the Babe sitting

alone and forlorn in the box seat. He waved to his old teammate, then ducked into the shadow of the dugout and sat next to Connie Mack.

"What's this all about, Mr. Mack?" he asked, as he sat next to the frail-looking old man.

"What do you mean, Louis?"

Phil Rizzuto led off for Mack's team. Carl Mays scowled at the diminutive shortstop, then threw a wicked underhand fast ball at the Scooter's head. Rizzuto hit the dirt as Bill Klem calmly called ball one.

"This game, the guys here." Gehrig's handsome face was truly troubled. "I mean, I *died*, Mr. Mack. There was a lot of pain, and I was in the hospital, and my wife was crying and . . . all of a sudden, I'm here."

"I died, too, Louis," said Mack, as Rizzuto danced away from another fast ball aimed at his ear. "Everyone dies."

Gehrig stared at him. "Then . . . where are we?"

Mack smiled gently. "That all depends, Louis. It all depends on this game. And that big fellow sitting up there in the stands."

"The Babe?"

Mack nodded as Rizzuto slapped weakly at a curve and popped it toward Eddie Stanky at second base. The Scooter trudged halfway down the base path, then turned toward the dugout, looking glad to be out of range of Mays's beanballs.

Gehrig scanned the infield. "Wait a minute, where's Hornsby? Who's that little fellow out at second?"

Connie Mack sighed unhappily. "The other team has a certain amount of flexibility in the rules," he said.

"They can take players in and out of the lineup whenever they want to?"

With an even deeper sigh, Mack admitted, "That was just one of the provisions that Mr. Comiskey insisted upon, Louis. There are other changes, too. Now and again you'll see them playing on an artificial surface, a kind of fake grass. It helps the singles hitters immensely. You'll see their Rose fellow take special advantage of that, I suspect. And if this threatening weather actually turns to rain, they'll play indoors, in a ballpark with a roof over it."

Gehrig gaped at the thought.

"And they even have what they call a designated hitter, Louis, a fellow who just steps up to the plate and hits for the pitcher. He never has to play any defense."

"Really?" Gehrig shook his head in surprise. "Free substitution? Fake grass? A roof, for god's sake? Full-time hitters? That just doesn't seem like baseball to me, Mr. Mack."

"There are a lot of us who feel that way, Louis, but those are today's rules."

"And we can't get our own roof, or use a permanent hitter if we want?"

Mack took off his straw hat, used the back of his hand to mop his brow, and put the hat back on. "Well, Louis, it's more that we choose *not* to. It just doesn't seem right to me. We are, after all, on the side of the angels, Louis. I thought we ought to play the game the way it's meant to be played."

And Lou nodded in agreement, then turned to look up into the box seats, where the Babe sat, watching.

To the Babe's credit, by the bottom of the first he was pretty much done with the hot dogs and beer and was limiting himself to an occasional peanut, carefully squeezing the shell to crack it, then breaking off the top half of the shell and tossing the nuts, nestled there in the bottom half, into his mouth.

But that was all, just the peanuts. Oh, and a sip of beer once in a while to wash them down. And just one more hot dog now and again.

But he was slowing down on the eating because, in truth, the game was beginning to bother him. He knew it was just some sort of exhibition, and so they were being a little easy on the rules and all, but not only were Comiskey's guys substituting right and left, coming in and then out of the game whenever they seemed to want to, they were also playing a mean, vicious brand of ball.

In the top of the second, for instance, Ty Cobb, at the plate again even though he'd hit in the first and wasn't due up, slashed a line drive into the gap in right that had stand-up double written all over it. The Negro kid in right, though, got a good jump on the ball and chased it down on the third hop, before it got to the warning track. Then he turned and fired to second, and it was suddenly a close play as the ball and Cobb approached the bag at the same time.

And damned if Ty didn't come in with those spikes up high, trying to move the shortstop, that Rizzuto guy, off the bag or cut him if he stayed in. Rizzuto, to his credit, stood his ground, catching Aaron's throw on the first hop and bringing the glove down in front of Cobb's right foot as it approached the bag. Out.

But the left foot, up high, caught Rizzuto on the right calf, tearing right through the baggy flannel and cutting open a good six-inch gash that bled badly until the trainer, Bob Bauman from the Cardinals, trotted out from the dugout to get enough pressure on it to stop the flow.

Rizzuto limped off the field under his own power, but he was obviously in pain. Marty Marion, tall and lanky for a shortstop, came out to replace him. Cobb, glaring defiantly, watched it all, hands on hips, until Rizzuto left, then trotted into the Comiskey dugout to a few handshakes and back slaps from his teammates.

And in the bottom of the second Carl Mays hit two of Mack's players. First he put a fastball into Aaron's ribs, then he followed that up with an-

other heater that caught Brooks Robinson on the left wrist. If Brooks hadn't gotten that hand up in the way, the ball might have caught him in the face. There was an audible gasp from Mack's dugout as the dull thwack of the ball hitting flesh echoed through the park. Then there were angry shouts, but Mays, imperious on the mound, ignored them, and Klem, behind the plate, bade the game go on.

The Babe, munching peanuts, scowled as he sat in the stands. It wasn't right. He was starting to get downright mad about it. Okay, it wasn't like Comiskey's guys were a bunch of choir boys, they were rough, tough players, by God, and everybody knew it; but the Babe thought this game was meant to be for *fun*, for the love of the game and all that. Those guys shouldn't be cutting each other up out there. They're playing like it was a World Series, like their lives depended on it.

They took Mays out after Charlie Gehringer whacked a double down the right-field line. The Babe stared, wide-eyed, at Comiskey's new pitcher. The guy had a beard! Must be from the House of David team. He was a southpaw, in to face Williams and then Lou.

Williams walked. Lou swung and missed a really wicked curve ball. The bearded left-hander grinned on the mound and yelled something the Babe didn't quite catch, maybe in Spanish.

He tried his curve again. Wrong move. Lou smashed it way, way out there, so high and deep the ball disappeared into the bright sky. Three-run homer. That was all for the bearded left-hander.

But Comiskey's guys started hitting, too. And slashing any infielder who got in their way. Durocher barreled into Charlie Gehringer at second on a routine double-play ball, knocked him flat. It was such a cheap shot that the Babe jumped out of his seat and yelled at Durocher as he trotted in from the field. Leo glanced up at the only man in the stands and seemed to look—embarrassed? The Babe sat down again, stunned at that.

The game went on, seesawing back and forth. The Babe would roar whenever Comiskey's guys pulled one of their lousy stunts. It felt real good, in fact, to let the anger explode, tell those cheap-shot bums what bush-league bastards they were, get the juices flowing again like they hadn't in a long, long time.

"By God," the Babe muttered to himself, "if I weren't so old, if I weren't in such rotten shape, I'd go out there and teach those sonsabitches a lesson they wouldn't forget."

But he was old and fat and useless. And he knew it.

Then came the sixth inning.

A chunky right-hander named Wynn was pitching for Comiskey now. Lou was at the plate, and the Babe was thinking about all the good years he and Gehrig had put in together.

Truth be known, the Babe had always had mixed feelings about Lou.

On the one hand, he envied the Dutchman a bit, that tight focus on the game, the way he always kept himself in shape, the reputation he had as a nice guy and a smart one, a real gentleman. In a lot of ways, the Babe wished he could have been more of a gentleman.

But, on the other hand, the Babe thought that Lou had always been so busy being nice that a lot of times he didn't seem to be having much fun. The booze, the women, the highlife—it was all part of the fun, and if the game wasn't *fun*, why play? My God, it ought to be fun, that was the whole point. Lou had always seemed so damned serious about everything, and that was too bad.

That was part of what was making the Babe so mad right now about these other fellows, these guys playing for Comiskey. The way they were playing was too low, too mean, for it to be any fun. They had forgotten what the game was about. It wasn't life and death, it was *baseball*, for Christ's sake, the joy of hitting, of catching and throwing the ball, or rounding third on a home-run trot, of sliding into second with a double, of just knocking the dirt off the cleats with the handle of the bat.

Ah, yes, the bat. Watching Lou take two balls low and away, then swing and hit a long foul ball out into the right field seats for a 2-1 count, the Babe could almost feel the way it was to hold his old Louisville Slugger, to swing it and make contact. He leaned back in his seat and stretched his arms out, opening and closing those meaty hands, tightening the arm muscles, feeling good in doing so.

He brought his hands together, made fists, placed the left fist over the right as if holding a bat, and brought the two fists back into a stance, as if he were waiting for a pitch, a good fastball out over the plate, rising, begging to be hit. He felt good doing it, real good, like a kid again, having fun.

"Damned if it wouldn't feel good. Just one more time," he said aloud, to no one in particular. "Damned if it wouldn't."

It was calming, thinking about that. The Babe almost forgot how infuriated he'd been by the rough play, when Wynn changed all that, almost forever. First he came inside on Lou for ball three, and then, while the Babe watched, horrified, Wynn—despite the count—brought in a rising fastball, high and tight, that caught Lou just above the ear and laid him out cold in the dirt.

It looked for a second like maybe Lou had gotten his hand up to block it, but then the Babe heard the awful *chunk* of ball hitting flesh and the Iron Horse just lay there. Babe knew it was serious. As Lou lay still in the dirt the Babe rose from his seat.

"You god-damned sonsabitches!" he yelled, and started walking down toward the diamond. "You bunch a shitheaded bastards!" he yelled again, taking the wide concrete steps two at a time. "That ain't baseball, that ain't the way it's supposed to be played!"

He reached the low gate that was next to the dugout, but didn't bother to open it, just vaulted over the rail instead and landed on the field.

And in doing that, he realized that there had been some changes. He felt good, he felt really good. He looked down at himself, expecting to see the man he'd become, that rounded belly, the toothpick legs, the arms with the flesh on them loose, hanging down, like the jowls on his face. Damn old age. He *hated* it, hated getting old, hated knowing that he couldn't hit anymore, hated having to live the game through memories.

And what he saw instead was the Babe he'd been at twenty-five, his first year in the outfield for the Yankees. Solid, tight, firm. The legs were strong, he could feel that. And the arm felt good, real good. He brought his hands to his face, felt the youth there.

He hustled over to where Lou lay, barely conscious, the trainer working on him, talking to him in low tones, trying to bring him out of it.

"Lou," the Babe said, leaning over to look at Gehrig. "Lou, it was a damn cheap shot, a rotten lowdown no-good thing."

Gehrig, his eyes focusing as Ruth watched, smiled. "Yeah, Babe, it was a little inside, wasn't it?"

"A little inside?" Babe snorted. "He *meant* to bean you, Lou. That dirty little coward! He did it on purpose, I tell you."

"Babe," said Lou, slowly sitting up. "Babe, you look good, you look ready to play." And he started to try to stand, first coming up to his knees.

"Lou. I sure wished he hadn't thrown at you like that, that's all. He could've killed you."

"No, no," said Gehrig, waving away the help and sympathy. "No, I'll be all right. I'll . . ." and he nearly collapsed, giving up on the idea of standing and then falling back to one knee. "Shoot, I'm a little woozy, I guess."

Connie Mack, standing next to Lou, patted his star on the back. "You just take it easy, Louis. We'll get a pinch-runner for you. There's plenty of talented players left around here, you just don't worry about it."

"Mr. Mack," said the Babe, reaching down to help Lou to his feet as Gehrig tried again to rise. "I'd like to be that runner, if it's all right with you. I think I'd like to get into this game after all."

"Well, that's fine, George, of course," said Mack, as he and the Babe helped Gehrig walk slowly toward the dugout. "You'll be hitting fourth, then, in Lou's spot. We'll put you out in right, in Henry's spot, and bring in Gil Hodges. And we're sure glad to have you on the team."

The Babe trotted out to first, not bothering to loosen up at all, feeling too good to need it. Somehow he was in uniform now, instead of the suit he'd been wearing.

The next fellow up for Mack's team was Willie Mays, and he went with the first pitch from Wynn, a fastball low and away, and took it to the opposite field, sending it into the corner in right. The Babe, off at the crack

of the bat, was making it to third standing up, but that wasn't good enough, not after what had been going on here.

Instead of easing into third, he ignored the stop sign from Yogi, the third base coach, and barreled right on through, pushing off the bag with his right foot and heading toward home.

Out in right, Joe Jackson had chased down the ball and come up expecting to see men on second and third, but there was Ruth already rounding third and heading home. Shoeless Joe took one hop step and fired toward Thurman Munson at the plate.

Munson had the plate blocked, and was reaching up with that big mitt to catch the throw as the Babe came in, shoulder down, determined to plow right through him and score.

The collision raised a cloud of dust, and for a long second Bill Klem hesitated over making the call. Then, with a smile and long, slow deep-throated growl, he yanked his thumb toward the sky and called the Babe out.

The Babe was in a fury. He leaped to his feet, started screaming bloody murder at Klem.

"Out? How the hell could you call me out? He dropped the goddamned ball! Can't you see anything, you dumb—"

The umpire silenced him with the jab of a finger. "You just got into the game, Babe," Klem snapped. "You wanna get tossed out so soon?"

Growling, holding in the anger, the Babe slowly dusted off his uniform, staring at Klem the whole time. Klem stared back, hands on hips. Then, shaking his head, fists clenched, the Babe trudged over to the dugout.

Munson shakily got up on one knee, reached over to pick up the ball from where it had trickled away, gave Klem a puzzled glance, and then flipped the ball out to Wynn. In all the commotion, Mays had moved up to third, and there was still a game to play. Munson adjusted his chest protector, pulled the mask down firmly, and crouched behind the plate as Wynn went through the usual fidgeting and finally stood on the rubber and looked in for the signal. The game went on.

The Babe had calmed down a bit in the dugout when Gehrig, still pale, came over to chat with him.

"Tough call, Babe," Lou said, slapping him on the back.

"Yeah. Tough, all right. Say, Dutch, you feeling okay now?"

Gehrig ran his right hand through his hair. There was an ugly bluish lump rising on his wrist. He saw Ruth notice the bruise, dropped his hand, then smiled, nodded, said "Yeah, sure, better, Babe, better," he said. "You just keep that temper under control out there, right? You always did have a problem with that. We need you thinking straight, Babe, okay?"

"Sure, Lou, sure," said the Babe, and gave Lou a puzzled look as the Iron Horse walked away.

The sixth ended with the Mack's team still a run ahead, but in the sev-

enth Comiskey's team used a walk, an outrageously bad call at first, and a sharp single up the middle from Rose to tie the game at five apiece. Mack's team threatened in the bottom but couldn't get a run across even with the bases full and just one out.

Then, in the top of the eighth, Bill Terry hit a sharp grounder to Hodges at first, who moved away from the bag to get a glove on it, then flipped to Robin Roberts, Mack's pitcher. Roberts had to reach to catch the toss while stepping on the bag, and Terry ran him down. There was a tangle of arms and legs rolling in the chalk and dust, and when it all settled, Terry was safe at first and Roberts was done for the day, his ankle badly spiked.

There were other pitchers available, of course, but Connie Mack had something particular in mind, some kind of purpose, and waved out to right, to the Babe. And so, for the first time since a brief appearance in 1933, Babe Ruth came in to pitch.

He had his best stuff, a blazing fastball that he could place accurately. It was the Babe Ruth of 1916 on the mound, the Ruth who won 23 games and had an ERA of 1.75. The Ruth who pitched twenty-nine straight scoreless innings in World Series play.

Comiskey's guys would have had a tough time getting to the Babe in any event, but now, his anger really seething, the Babe was viciously untouchable, high and tight fastballs threatening skulls, everything working inside, his ire obvious to every hitter who stepped into the box.

"Stay on your toes, wiseass," he bellowed at Cobb, throwing close enough to shave his chin.

And at the plate he was just as angry, though he had to control it some. In the bottom of the eighth, he came to the plate again with one out and nobody on. Bob Gibson, pitching in relief, wasn't at all afraid to play even-up, and came in with one under Ruth's chin on the first pitch, and then broke off a curve low and away for ball two, before throwing something in the strike zone, a blazing fastball low and inside, an unhittable pitch. For anybody else.

The Babe golfed it, reached down to make contact and drove the ball up and out, deep to right, twenty rows up, a towering home run. As he rounded the bases he muttered under his breath as he passed each of Comiskey's players, cursing them quietly, so the umps wouldn't hear, but swearing to get each and every one of them the next time up.

They all looked shocked. The Babe? Swearing vengeance? Rollicking, fun-loving Babe Ruth, threatening to bean them, calling them the foulest names they'd ever heard? They looked like whipped little boys, scared and ashamed.

They deserve it, the Babe said to himself as he trotted into the dugout. They deserve whatever I dish out to them, the dirty bastards.

Then he looked across the infield to the other team's dugout and saw

Comiskey grinning from ear to ear, like he was perfectly satisfied with the way the game was developing.

It stopped being a baseball game and turned into a war. Every batter who faced the Babe had to dive into the dirt. The Babe wasn't throwing warning pitches; he was trying to break skulls. He fired his hardest, especially at Cobb and Durocher. Klem, officiating behind the plate, gave him a few hard stares, but let the mayhem go on.

The Babe expected the other guys to come charging out to the mound after him. He was ready for a real fight. Spoiling for one, in fact. But they just took their turns at bat, dove to the ground when the Babe zinged a fastball at their heads, and meekly popped up or grounded out. Vaguely, through his haze of anger, the Babe saw that they all looked scared. Terrified. Good, he thought. Serves 'em right.

In the top of the ninth, Rose worked up the nerve to stand in there and one of the Babe's fastballs nailed him in the shoulder. Hal Chase went in to run for him. The Babe tried twice to pick him off first, couldn't do it, and then, angry as hell, came in with a high, hard one to Shoeless Joe, who slapped it out into short right field, putting men on first and third. Cobb's fly ball to center, three pitches later, gave Comiskey's men the tie before the Babe could pitch out of the jam.

Babe trudged off the field, more furious than ever that he'd let them tie the score. His teammates shied away from him. They're sore at me, Babe grumbled to himself. Connie Mack just shook his head, looking distressed. Even Lou seemed unhappy, disappointed in him.

So what? the Babe thought. So they got a lucky run off me. At least they're not beaning and spiking anybody now. They're whipped and they know it.

In the bottom of the ninth, the Babe was hitting fourth and just hoping to get an at-bat. Marty Marion, leading off, smacked a grounder up the middle that looked like a sure single, but Durocher came behind the bag and made a hell of a play to get him. Charlie Gehringer fouled off four pitches and finally drew a walk, but then Lefty Grove came in to get Ted Williams on a long fly to deep right, so that brought the Babe up with two outs and one on.

The Babe knew all about Grove. He was a fastball pitcher all the way, with a good curve that he didn't bother with much since he had so much heat. Somebody said once that Grove could throw a lamb chop past a wolf. We'll see about that, the Babe thought.

The Babe figured he could wait him out a pitch or two and then take him deep and end this game. That would feel good, real good. He was so mad that he wanted to do more than just win, he wanted to really hurt these guys, teach them a lesson, humiliate them.

But the Babe didn't figure he'd get a chance to do anything like that, much as he wanted to. Instead, he'd just sit back a bit, let Grove have a

little rope, and then crush one. End the game in real Babe Ruth style and leave the damned bastards standing there on the field, cowed for good.

But it wasn't Grove on the mound when the Babe stepped into the batter's box. Instead, as he settled in, digging a spot for the left foot to brace, and looked up, it was Charley Root.

Where the hell had Root come from? Then the Babe smiled. This was typical. Of course Comiskey would pull a stunt like this. In 1932, in the third game of the World Series, the Babe had gotten even with the Cubs by showing up Root, pointing at the spot in the stands where he planned to hit his home run and then doing it. He called his shot and it became part of baseball's legend.

Root said it never happened that way, experts analyzed old home movies of the moment and tended to agree. But the Babe knew better, he'd gotten even with Root back then and he would do it now, just the same way.

First, he wanted to let a few pitches go by, just to get another good look at Root's stuff, and to let the moment build up a bit.

The first pitch came right at his head, and the Babe had to fight the instinct to hit the dirt, getting away from it. Instead, he just leaned back and let the pitch go by his eyes, inches away. Gehringer, on first, could see how Root had his attention focused on the plate, and took off as the pitcher started his wind-up. Munson pegged it down to second, but never had a chance, and Gehringer was on second with an easy steal.

The Babe, laughing as the ball came back to the mound, stepped out of the box and looked back at the catcher.

"That the best you guys can do? You sons of bitches, give me a strike in here now and I'll ride the thing right out of here."

Munson just shook his head, said nothing.

The second pitch came even closer, aimed at the Babe's ribs. It was another fastball, a good one with a lot of movement aimed high and tight. The Babe didn't flinch, and the ball came so close to him that Klem, umpiring behind the plate, hesitated for a moment, wondering if it hadn't clipped the Babe's jersey.

Sensing the hesitation, the Babe turned to face Klem and said loudly. "It didn't touch me, Klem, and you know it. You and me got some history, but this ain't your fight here, Klem. Just let it go, you hear me? Let it go."

Klem stared back at Ruth. "You're showing me up, Babe, and I don't like it. That's not your style. I don't know what's eating you, but just get back in there and play."

"What's eating me," growled the Babe as he dug in again, "is a bunch of nasty little goddamned bushers playing dirty ball. That's what eating me."

"And what've you been doing, Babe?" Klem snapped.

Munson, looking toward Root on the mound, pulled down his face mask and added: "Hey Babe, some of us don't have a choice out here, so don't take it out on us, huh?"

"No choice, hell. You guys play rough, and then when I give you a dose of your own medicine, you start crying," the Babe said.

Munson shook his head and muttered, "You still don't get it, do you, Babe?"

"Play ball," Klem ordered.

Root pounded the ball into his glove nervously and glared toward the plate. The Babe stepped back out of the box, lifted his bat toward the right field seats and pointed it.

"You got that?" the Babe yelled out to the pitcher. There was no doubt about it this time, nothing unsure. "You got that? Right out there, Charlie, right out there, maybe ten rows up."

Root glared at him, and then, as the Babe stepped back in, went into his windup and brought in the next pitch, a good fastball down low for a strike.

The Babe just watched it go by, full of confidence, not bothering with the pitch because it wasn't where he wanted it. By God, he wanted to show these guys up, every one of them. They'd put some good men out of the game, especially poor old Lou, and the Babe was going to get even, going to win this thing in fine style.

The next pitch started out low and away, way out of the strike zone, and then tailed off into the dirt as Root tried to get the Babe to go after a bad one. But the Babe didn't move, and the ball got by Munson, who couldn't even get a glove on it as it skipped by.

Gehring, on second, made it easily to third while Munson chased it down.

The count was 3 and 1 now, with a man on third and two outs. The Babe started to step back in, then hesitated.

He stared at Root and saw a look of utter hopelessness in the pitcher's face. Root knew the Babe was going to hammer him, blast the ball out of sight, just the way he'd done in '32. The infielders all looked like whipped dogs, too. Hell, even Durocher had that hangdog look about him. That's not like Lippy, he'd always been a scrapper.

What had the catcher said? *You still don't get it, do you, Babe?* And before that: *Some of us don't have a choice out here.*

Damn, he wanted to get even with these guys, he really did. But . . . something really weird was going on here.

And the Babe remembered. Remembered his own cancer, remembered Lou being so sick and frail and—the Dutchman had *died*. I went to his funeral, for God's sake! *I died!* The Babe looked around the field again. Cobb, Hornsby, Joe Jackson.

"Time out," he said to Klem. And he went over to the dugout, trailing his big brown Louisville Slugger in the dust.

Connie Mack came halfway up the dugout steps. "Something wrong, George?"

Feeling perplexed, not really believing what his own mind was telling him, the Babe asked, "Mr. Mack, this ain't just another ball game, is it?"

Mack's blue eyes seemed to sparkle. "No, George, it certainly is not an ordinary game."

Lou came over and joined them, holding an ice bag on his right wrist. "It's a special game, Babe. We've got to win it."

"But we've got to win it in the *right* way," Mack said. "It won't matter if we win the game but you end up playing with Mr. Comiskey's team."

The Babe felt startled. "You'd trade me?"

Mack shook his head. "No, George. Up here the players make their own decisions about which side they want to be with."

"Well, I sure don't want—" The Babe hesitated. "You mean all those guys, Leo and Cobb and Shoeless Joe and all, they *chose* to play for Comiskey?"

"They didn't realize it at the time, but, yes, they chose the wrong team."

"They didn't mean to, though, did they?" Gehrig asked.

The ghost of a smile played across Mack's bloodless lips. "I'm sure that if they knew then what they know now, they would have acted differently."

The Babe frowned with concentration. This was a lot to think about, a lot to figure out.

"Are we playing a ball game here or not?" Klem bellowed from home plate. "Get back in the box, Babe, or I'll forfeit the game."

"Okay, Klem, okay," the Babe hollered back. He started back toward the plate, his mind churning. These other guys have *got* to play for Comiskey, whether they want to or not? They got no choice?

Abruptly he turned and yelled to Mack, "If we win this game, it's for all of 'em. Get me? Not just for me. *All* of the others, too!"

Lou grinned happily at him. Mack seemed to hesitate for a moment, as if holding a private conversation with himself. Then he, too, smiled, and tipped his straw boater to Ruth, agreeing to the terms.

And the Babe dug in at the batter's box, cocked his Louisville Slugger, looked ready to cream Root's next pitch.

But that's what they all expect, he thought. They're waiting for me to crush it, waiting for me to show them how much better I am than any of them.

"Pride, George." He remembered Brother Dominic telling him, time and again at the orphanage in Baltimore. "Pride will be your undoing, unless you learn to control it, use it for good."

He took a deep breath. As Root stepped onto the rubber and checked Gehringer, leading off third, the Babe pointed with his bat again toward the right-field seats. "Maybe twenty rows up," he taunted.

Root scowled, went into an abbreviated windup, and threw a wicked

fastball at the Babe's ear. He hit the ground. The ball thwacked into Munson's mitt.

"Strike two!" called Klem.

The Babe leaped to his feet, bat in hand. Klem stared at him from behind his mask.

Then, with a childish grin, the Babe got back into the batter's box. "Come on, chickenshit," he yelled to Root, hoisting the bat over his shoulder. "Put one over the plate."

Root did. Another fastball, low and away this time. The Babe knew Klem would call it strike three if he let it pass.

He didn't. He squared his feet and tapped the ball toward third base, as neat a bunt as ever laid down the line. The infield had been playing way back, of course. The outfielders too. Everybody knew that the Babe was going to swing for the fences.

And here's this bunt trickling slowly down the third-base line, too far from the plate for Munson to reach, too slow for Tabor at third to possibly reach it. Gehringer streaked home with the winning run while the Babe laughed all the way to first base.

The game was over.

And the other guys were laughing, too! Tabor picked the ball off the grass near third and twirled it in his hand. As the fielders headed in for the visitors' dugout, Durocher cracked:

"Twenty rows up, huh, Babe?"

Cobb gave a huff. "You're stealing my stuff now, Babe. Using your head out there."

Even old Charlie Root just shook his head and grinned at the Babe. "Who'd a thought it?" he said, true wonderment in his eyes. "Who'd a thought it?"

On impulse, the Babe reached out his hand. Root looked startled, then he took it in a firm ballplayer's grip.

"I was afraid you'd strike me out, Charlie," said the Babe.

Root actually laughed. "Yeah. Sure. Like I did in Chicago."

And he followed his teammates into the shadows of the dugout, where Charlie Comiskey stood glaring hotly at them.

The Babe trotted to his own dugout. Lou and the other guys slapped his back and congratulated him on the big winning blast. One of the Negro players, Mays, raised his hand up above his head, palm outward. The Babe didn't know what to do.

Hank Aaron, looking slightly embarrassed, demonstrated a high five with Mays. The Babe grinned and tried it.

"Okay!" he laughed, and said again, "Okay!"

He was proud of himself. He'd done the right thing with the bunt, the right thing for the team.

As the other players trooped into the clubhouse, laughing and slapping

backs and making wisecracks, the Babe lingered behind, looking out from the dugout to the field. The sun was breaking through the clouds, throwing long shadows across the infield. What a lovely place a ballpark could be.

He heard a polite cough from behind him, down in the tunnel that led to the clubhouse. It was Mr. Mack, half hidden in the shadows.

"That was really something, George. Very unselfish of you. When those other fellows come over to join us in our clubhouse I'm sure they'll want to thank you."

The Babe didn't know what to say. Praise from Mr. Mack left him tongue-tied.

Mack smiled, said, "Yes, George. You've learned to think out there. You'll make a fine manager some day soon."

"Geez, Mr. Mack, you really think so?"

"Yes, George, I do. We'll have to talk about that, about just what kind of contract we can work out for you. Player/manager, I'd think."

"Player/manager!"

Mack put out his frail, bony hand and they shook on it, the Babe pumping poor Mack's arm so hard that Mack finally had to disengage himself.

"Oh, gosh. I'm sorry, Mr. Mack. I just got carried away there," said the Babe.

"It's all right, George," Mack replied gently. "It's perfectly all right."

Then he headed down the dark tunnel toward the clubhouse. The Babe started after him, but turned first to look out at the field once again.

Player/manager next season. That's what made the game so fine. There was always next season, always something to look forward to, to strive toward.

And then the Babe, with a boyish grin on his wide face, turned away from the field and ducked into the long, dim tunnel that would take him onward. ●

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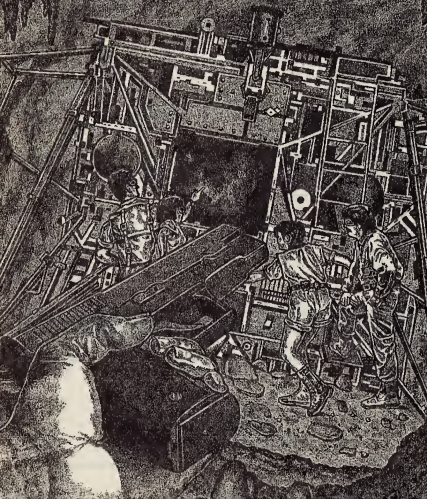


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Stephen Dedman

TOUR DE FORCE



Stephen Dedman tells us, "I enjoy traveling, and have been mistaken for an Englishman, a Canadian, a German, an Italian, a Frenchman, a New Zealander, a South African, a Bostonian, a Tasmanian, a criminal, and a waxwork. I live in Western Australia with my wife, a computer, too many cats, and too few books." Mr. Dedman's first novel, *The Art of Arrow Cutting*, will be out in June from Tor Books.

Illustration by Ron Chironno

The road to Kalbarri looked as though it hadn't been improved since the turn of the century, and the Niva parked at the pump ahead of me was covered with dust the color of bad sunburn. I was sure it wasn't Sergei—nothing would have persuaded him to drive a Russian car this far from a city, not even Ultra Secret—but I sat there and practiced pretending not to know him for a few seconds before opening the door. That was a mistake; I'd thought Perth was hot, but this was torture, and I almost wished I'd worn a skirt. At least they'd done something about the flies.

There was a youngish blond couple slumped in the snack bar when I went in to pay for the petrohol. The old woman behind the counter took my Visa card and stared—I almost expected her to bite it, to see if the gold was real—and then scuttled out the back to phone the bank; I guess she'd never seen a rich aborigine before. The blonds looked up, glanced through the window at my car, and the man asked, "Are you headed north?" He spoke English far better than any Australian I'd ever heard, with a very slight hint of an accent; Bavarian, if I'm any judge.

"Yeah. You on holiday?"

"Yes," the woman replied. "Monkey Mia, to see the dolphins. Have you been there?"

"No." I speak a few dozen words of Delphic, about as much as any human knows, but I'd never had a chance to use it; the dolphins are too busy smiling for tourists to have any time for linguists. I guess it pays better, and they need the money: suing the whaling industry must be costing them a fortune.

"You're not—from around here?" asked the man. He only hesitated for an instant, but I'm sure he was about to say "a native."

"No," I replied. "My mother was from Sydney, but I was born in Vancouver, and I've lived most of my life in the US. Have you been here before?"

"No."

"Look out for the grids across the road. Some of the local farmers aren't fond of city people at the moment." That was about as diplomatic as English can get. The stock market still hadn't recovered from the impact of Lagva technology, and the badly burnt Australian banks were foreclos-

ing on their loans and repossessing farms. The grids—ostensibly for keeping sheep in, not accountants out—and shotguns were among the milder measures being employed: some farmers preferred AK-47s, and one had been caught importing a 130mm Katyusha in a crate of farm machinery. A tourist who asked intelligent questions was recently mistaken for a plainclothes banker, and shot; fortunately, this sort of thing didn't happen often.

The counterhand returned, her expression sour and skeptical. "Dr. van Elven?"

"Yes?" I replied, automatically. She handed my card back, rather reluctantly, and I glanced at my watch; twenty-seven hours in Australia, and I already hated the place. I turned to the tourists, and smiled. "Enjoy your holiday," I said, before returning to my car.

Sergei was waiting at the campsite, incongruously attired in a dusty Akubra hat, wraparound shades, and khaki fatigues with more pockets than a troop of kangaroos. With him was a very tall, very thin man who resembled two large snakes looking for a caduceus, who Sergei introduced as Richard Barnes. I'd assumed he was Australian, but his accent was Houstonian with a twist of something vaguely familiar. "Okay," I said, as we clambered into the air-conditioned cool of the hired RV. "You've dragged us *all* halfway around the world to one of the most forsaken spots on Earth at the worst possible time of year. So what's the story?"

Barnes blinked. "You're from the mainland too?"

"Yeah. Washington. This is my first time south of the equator; I was tromping through snow three days ago. I'm *waiting*, Sergei."

He smiled. "I'm sorry, Sara; if it'd been up to me, I would've arranged for a private flight and a complete dossier, all this skulking around is a waste of time . . . but I wanted you on the team—"

"You haven't told me anything yet."

"We've found a spaceship in the rocks," he said. "Not a Lagva ship, either. Our geologist—Kylie Chen, you'll meet her at the site—thinks it's been buried there for thirty thousand years, minimum."

Sergei has been a spymaster for both the KGB and the CIA, in that order, and breaking things to people gently is not among his gifts. "Not Lagva?" I repeated, stupidly.

"No."

"A Gahla'wat slave race?"

"I doubt it; they're not wearing neckties."

"They're intact?"

"Very nearly so—and so's the ship. It was found in a cave—an almost perfect sphere." Barnes sniffed. "Okay, an oblate spheroid. A climber kicked through one of the walls by accident, and found the ship trapped inside, hardly a scratch on it. If I were a science fiction fan, I'd say that meant—"

"A force field bubble," I murmured, at the same moment, and whistled. Barnes began muttering in a creole of English and physics, but I ignored him: this was the biggest breakthrough since the Lagva started lending us their technical journals.

The Lagva have faster-than-light travel, artificial gravity (the two go together like tornadoes and trailer parks) and pocket antimatter power plants, but this was something they didn't even have a *word* for. "Jesus. The climbers didn't *open* it, did they?"

"No. It has windows."

"You're kidding."

"No." I glanced at Barnes, who nodded. "How big is this thing?"

"Tiny," replied Sergei, before Barnes could answer. "Maybe twice the size of a Lagva singleship, not much bigger than an old Apollo Command-Supply Module. And the aliens are nearly three meters tall."

"What happened to the guy who found it?" asked Barnes.

"Girls," corrected Sergei. "A couple of Phys Ed majors from Perth. They just won an all-expenses-paid vacation on the moon."

"'In space,'" I muttered, "'no one can hear you squeal.' Why is this such a secret anyway?"

Sergei shook his head. "The next big breakthrough in physics? Look at the trade war the *last* one caused; you couldn't walk down Wall Street without a stockbroker landing on you."

"This isn't tribal land, is it?" asked Barnes.

"No," I replied. "It's a National Park. No aborigine will go near the place."

"Sacred?"

"No; just the opposite. Unlucky, tabu, bad medicine, cursed. . . Verboten. I don't know the language well enough."

"You're an aborigine," Barnes pointed out.

"I'm three-sixteenths Koori. My ancestors came from Sydney; I doubt they ever traveled this far west. This is Yamidji land."

He nodded. "Do you believe in sacred sites?"

"Hell, no," I replied, smiling politely. "I always thought the Alamo would be a great place for a Taco Bell."

Barnes flushed beneath his sunburn for a moment, and then looked out the window, pretending to be interested in the scenery. I suppose it wasn't any more boring than Texas, at that. Or any more holy, or less Hellish.

There was a tiny Japanese 4WD and an even smaller Chinese woman waiting by the gorge. Sergei, who knows everyone who knows anything, introduced us: "Kylie Chen, Sara van Elven." I shook her hand, admiring the calluses. Geologist, or paleontologist, or both. She had the almond-shaped eyes and serene smile of a statue of Buddha, the delicate beauty

that Asian women seem to keep until they mysteriously fossilize overnight, and muscles like a T'ang bronze horse. A moment later, she showed us the way to the site, and I realized where the muscles had come from.

Kalbarri Gorge isn't as deep or wide as the Mariner Valley, or even the Grand Canyon, but it's just as beautiful—until you have to rappel halfway down a cliff face at the height of an Australian summer. "No," I said. "No, you're kidding."

"You're scared of heights?" Kylie asked.

"Not usually," I assured her. "Only when I'm hanging from a rope with a twenty-meter drop between my ass and a lot of sharp rocks. I thought there was supposed to be a river down there."

"Not at this time of year." She sounded apologetic. Barnes was looking scornful, Sergei carefully neutral. We stood there baking for a few seconds, and then Barnes grabbed the rope and lowered himself over the edge. I stood there, waiting for the scream and the splat!; instead, I heard him yell, "Clear!" Damn.

Sergei and I glanced at each other, and then I turned my back to the cliff and took a firm grip on the rope; Sergei is nearly twice my age, and I wasn't going to let him make me look like a wimp in my own country, even though I'd never been here before. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, stepped back and dropped into nothingness for an eternity. I opened my eyes again, saw the red and pink striations of the sandstone before my face, looked up (down was too scary), and realized I'd descended less than a meter. So much for heroic gestures. Slowly, cautiously, I lowered myself down to the cave entrance, where Barnes was waiting, holding the rope taut. I considered kicking the smug bastard; instead, I carefully swung around him and dropped into the chamber.

I guess I'd been expecting a smooth floor, like you see in the movies and the tourist caves; I'd forgotten what Sergei had said about a sphere. It was remarkably smooth, for sandstone, and I slid feet-first down the inside of the bubble until I hit the ship.

I fumbled in my pocket for the Lagva flashlight that Vpokga(ro)tjj had given me, the same sort she'd used to shoot the Secretary of State, and made sure the beam was defocused and at low power before I switched it on.

My first thought was that it was the first thing I'd seen all day that wasn't coated with orange dust. It was large and box-shaped, about as aerodynamic as an old Kombi, with sturdy legs and big bowl-shaped feet; obviously designed for vertical takeoff. There was a row of holographic pictures and curvilinear symbols just before my eyes. I'd counted forty-eight distinct characters, thirty-three of them recurring, before I heard, or felt, movement behind me, and turned to see Sergei and Barnes walking carefully down the slope.

"What have you found?"

"Writing," I burred. "And these pictures, look." I traced along the images until I found the two I was after—a spectacularly ringed planet, and a moon dominated by an eye-like crater. "Saturn, and Mimas."

"Maybe," said Sergei. "Have you looked inside yet?"

"Inside?" I blinked. "Oh, the window. No, I hadn't gone any further than this."

"That's not Lagvan?"

"No, of course not."

"Just asking." We followed Sergei around the craft, and tried to look through the window. Our light-intensifier goggles enabled us to pick out some detail, but shining light on the crystal instantly rendered it opaque, like a one-way mirror. Damn.

The aliens could never have passed as human, even at a Mardi Gras, but they were featherless bipeds; they even had a pair of eyes and a pair of arms apiece, in approximately the right places. They were wearing clothes, too—either that, or their skins were of very different textures and colors and came naturally equipped with pockets. But their heads were too big for their necks, and their eyes lidless and disproportionately small and too close-set; their long arms had too many joints and ended in far too many fingers, their legs only bent the wrong way, and the smaller one had two prehensile-looking tails sprouting from above his/her pelvic girdle. "Light-worlders?" suggested Sergei.

"Probably, unless they're much tougher than they look. Same goes for the furniture." There were two strange but identifiable chairs, two couches, and a bench, all quite permanent-looking in a flimsy sort of way. There were also hatches and panels, on the sides only, and a large cylinder at the far end that might have been an airlock, a walk-in closet, a matter-transfer booth, a shower, a toilet, a refrigerator, or all of the above.

Barnes started humming mournfully; we all turned to stare at him, and he blushed slightly. "Pink Floyd. 'Wish You Were Here.' My grandparents were hippies."

I turned my attention back to the mess inside the spaceship. There were dozens of objects scattered over the sloping floor, most of which I couldn't recognize—hourglass shapes that would have fit their hands comfortably; lumps of unknown substances, some irregular, some symmetrical; lots of paper-thin equilateral triangles about a decimeter on a side, bearing holographs or the curvilinear characters I'd seen outside or both. "Geologists!" said Kylie, suddenly.

"What?"

"Okay, planetologists. Whatever. But that's a rock collection if I ever saw one—tektites, amethyst crystals, and that looks like petrified wood. I can't identify the others. . . ." She was almost salivating at the thought of discovering hitherto unknown species of stone.

"They're not very organized, for geologists," said Sergei, cautiously.

Kylie considered this. "Just because we can't see the organization doesn't mean it isn't there," she replied.

Sergei shrugged, and I stared into the mess. "That blue-green thing there's pretty regular for a rock . . . looks more like an egg."

"It could be a geode," said Kylie, uncertainly, then shrugged. "Or it *could* be a cassowary egg; a bit big, but it's the right shape. . . . Maybe they'd never seen hard-shell eggs before."

"Well, they're civilians, anyway," volunteered Barnes. "No weapons, transparent windows, and it's too damned small for a Q-ship—"

He sounded disappointed as well as relieved, and I suddenly recognized that hint of accent. "West Point?" I asked.

"Yep. Class of '14, second-worst in my year. I also went to MIT."

"And Los Alamos?" I asked. He turned to stare at Sergei, who smiled.

"I wish I'd had you working for me thirty years ago, Sara. Yes."

"The Weapon Shop?" I added.

"X Division," replied Barnes, dryly. "And now Pine Gap. So what?"

"So what're you doing here?"

"What if this *was* a military craft?" he asked, ungrammatically. "Who would you rather got to it first? You said yourself it's more advanced than the Lagva tech—what if it'd been armed with anti-matter bombs or disintegrators? Can you imagine what would happen if that sort of weapon fell into the hands of Hezbollah, or National Offensive, or the IRA?"

"What about the NRA?" I muttered, and shrugged. "Okay, you're right. But the force field—are you going to suppress that, too?"

"I don't know. First we'll have to *understand* it. But the force field may have offensive value, too—look at what the Lagva flashlight can do—and what if that thing on the guy's belt is a sidearm?"

I looked where he was pointing. One of the aliens seemed to be wearing a fanny pack between its slender, keeled chest and its considerable paunch. "What if it's a remote control?" I replied. "A respirator? A walk-man? His car keys? His lunch? Why would he be carrying a weapon?"

"Most explorers carry weapons," said Sergei, softly.

"So do spies," said Barnes.

I heard something hit the sandstone at the entrance, and we all turned around to see a fifth person drop, catlike, into the cave. Looking at the outside world with our goggles proved to be a mistake; we were dazzled, and saw nothing but the blurred silhouette of an athletic-looking man. By the time we'd recovered, he'd found his feet and a large pistol.

Barnes pushed Kylie to one side with one hand, and reached for his pocket with the other, but the intruder was faster, and we were dazzled again, this time by the muzzle flash from the gun. Barnes fell back against me, and didn't move again.

I could feel Sergei, standing next to me, tense up, but he remained

completely still. We stayed there until our vision had returned, and carefully looked at the gunman. It was the blond "tourist" from the roadhouse.

"Dr. van Elven?" he said, mockingly. "We meet again. And you, you must be Sergei Arseniev. I thought you'd have retired by now."

Sergei shrugged, very slightly. I knew he had a Lagva flashlight, but it would be next to useless at that range; we'd have to wait for the intruder to come closer. I looked down at Barnes. The bullet had passed through the left lens of his goggles; he was certainly dead. A small knife, balanced for throwing, lay by his right hand.

"I'm sure you're armed," the blond continued. "Everyone else around here is, even the tourists. And you outnumber me, too." There was another thud from the entrance, and the blond woman came scrabbling down the slope, unslinging an AK-47 as she descended. "If you drop all your weapons, maybe I won't have to even up the numbers. You first."

They patted us down after we handed them anything that could be used as a weapon—two Lagva flashlights, two Swiss Army knives, and a rockhammer. Finding nothing, they took our belts and boots, and dumped the lot into the gorge along with Barnes's body.

"It's okay," said the man. "We won't be here long enough for anybody to find us."

"I'd bet against that," responded Sergei, in German. "We're expecting a holo-V news team sometime before midnight. What do you think you can do in that time?"

The man gestured toward the spaceship with his gun. "Just get a souvenir of our trip," he replied, in English. "A weapon would be best, of course, but anything we could sell will do."

"Ah," said Sergei. "A mercenary. I thought you talked too much to be a professional spy."

"We're patriots," the man replied, coldly. "Not a concept I would expect any of you to understand. A Russian-American, a Chinese-Australian, a black—"

"Skip it," I advised. "My ancestors've been kicked out of more countries than yours ever invaded. But Germany's not doing so well in the trade war, either, is it? With the Neo-Nazis scaring the tourists away, I guess your economy needs a shot in the arm—or is this just a shot in the dark?"

The man opened his mouth to reply, but the woman spoke first. "We're wasting time. This is the spaceship?"

"Yes."

"You have been inside?"

"Christ, no!"

"Why not?"

Sergei and I stared at each other. Telling them that it was the most im-

portant archaeological site in history (well, you know what I mean) obviously wasn't going to cut any ice. "The atmosphere," Sergei said. "They might breathe chlorine, like the Lagva, or fluorine, or cyanide—"

The man smiled, and reached over his shoulder into his backpack, removing a respirator and a pair of goggles—the same brand as ours. "Or worse," I said. "There might be viruses in there . . . you've heard of *War of the Worlds*? *The Andromeda Strain*? Open that ship, and there might be a plague that makes the black death look like the common cold." I was fairly sure I was lying—the aliens hadn't decayed, and neither had the egg, which meant they probably routinely sterilized everything coming through the airlock—but it sounded good. The couple actually hesitated.

"Besides," said Sergei. "The ship has no power. How're you going to get it open? You just threw the rockhammer outside."

They considered that, and then the man replied, "Would you build a spaceship without a manual control for the airlock?"

I almost swore. Another freaking science fiction fan. He turned to the woman, and said, "Cover them. I'm going to have a look at the door." The woman grunted, scrambled backward up the slope, then sat with her back to the entrance. The man donned his respirator and goggles, and she followed suit. "So much for the rest of us," Kylie whispered, bitterly.

"Don't worry," I said, loudly. "Those are only twenty-minute tanks." I heard the man muttering on the far side of the ship, and we waited for what seemed like an hour before there came the sound of a soft metallic grinding.

Nothing exploded, and none of us died suddenly. The air smelt a little worse, but that might have been us.

"Oxygen breathers?" murmured Sergei.

"Great," I replied. "Aerobic bacteria, air-born diseases—" and two beautifully preserved alien bodies suddenly exposed to *our* bugs. I remembered a scene from *Five Million Years to Earth*, when the mummified Martians started decomposing as soon as their ship was opened, and discovered that my goggles were starting to cloud up. I was crying. These stupid, swinish, fanatical morons—

"At least there won't be any weapons," said Sergei. The AK-47 swung around to point straight at him. "Before we were so rudely interrupted," he said, politely, "my colleagues and I were discussing the design of the ship, and the occupations of its, uh, occupants. They're obviously not military—even *halfway* competent military personnel would never leave a door unsecured like that in unfamiliar territory." I thought of the G.I.s in Vietnam who used to travel around in their APCs with the hatches open, as though at a picnic, and nodded my agreement. "And spies would be even more careful," Sergei continued. "Therefore, they must be civilians. Unarmed."

I turned, and looked through the window. The man was hammering at hatches on the wall, which refused to open. Voice-activated, maybe? Or

bioscanner locks? Maybe it didn't matter. He picked up a few of the triangular cards, and then threw them away. Eventually, he kicked at one of the bodies—and then noticed the fanny-pack. I heard Sergei think *Shit!*—probably in Russian—but kept my expression neutral.

A moment later, the man returned, peeled the respirator off thankfully, and took a careful sniff of the air. "Okay," I said. "You've got what you came for. Now get the fuck out of here."

"Not so fast," he replied, and smiled. He'd holstered his pistol, and held the alien device in his right hand; we watched him poke at various switches without result.

"Battery's probably dead," said Sergei. "Or it's corroded into a useless lump; it's been there for at least—" and then he shut up, as the object unfolded. The end result resembled a triple-barreled machine-pistol with a complex triangular scope. The man broke into a grin, and then laughed aloud, then pointed the contraption at Sergei. "I've had enough of you, Colonel," he said, still giggling, and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened. He stared at Sergei, and then at the device. I heard someone giggle, and realized that it was me. The man stared at me, and then fumbled for his pistol with his left hand.

"Okay," he said. "Okay. It doesn't work. But this does. Give me one good reason not to kill the lot of you."

I gulped for air, and finally managed to stop laughing. "I might be able to show you how to use it," I wheezed, then shook my head and began giggling hysterically again. "God, the look on your face—"

"*Shut up!*" he screamed, waving the pistol and the alien device at me. He waited until we'd both calmed down a little, then said, "Okay. I'll give you three minutes. At the end of the first minute, we kill the Russian. At the end of the second minute—"

"I get the picture," I replied, holding my hand out. He harrumphed, and then handed the device over.

I looked at the controls and the gauges, then stared through the scope. There were no crosshairs, and it didn't magnify or change the light level; it was like looking through a short length of triangular pipe, apart from a few curvilinear characters and other symbols glowing along the edges. I looked at the ship, and through the window, seeing the aliens and the surrounding chaos, and blinked. *Wish you were here to help me*, I thought, and then glanced at the holos on the outside of the ship. *Wish you were here.*

It was only a hunch, but the longer I looked at the device, the more I dared to hope. The mercenary snapped, "Thirty seconds, doctor," and I looked up to see him standing behind Kylie, his gun to her head.

"Yeah." I pressed a likely looking switch, and heard a quick faint *zzip!* "Okay," I said, and pointed the contraption at his face. "Drop the pistol, and we can discuss this like reasonable people."

"You can't shoot both of us," he replied, calmly. "If you pull the trigger, Uschi will shoot you, then the Russian, and then the girl. I *know* her gun works. Prove that that thing fires, and we'll take it, and we'll go; we'll pull up the rope, and shoot out one of your tires, but only one; that should give us enough of a head start. Just fire a round into the roof and—"

"A round?" I smiled. "This only affects living matter. Do you think any halfway intelligent spacers would use something that would put a hole in their ship if it missed?"

He considered this, and then smiled. "You're smarter than you look. Okay. Put the gun on the floor, and go and stand near the Russian." Slowly, I obeyed.

"I hope you know what you're doing," said Sergei, in Navajo. I didn't reply. The man released his grip on Kylie, and pushed her over toward us, then reached for the device with his left hand. He looked at Kylie, then at Sergei, then at me, and then back at Sergei. I removed my goggles, and threw them at his feet.

"What are you doing?"

"If you're going to kill me," I said, "you're going to look me in the eye when you do it."

The mercenary shrugged, then reholstered his pistol, switched the alien device from his left hand to his right, and then pointed it straight at Sergei's chest. Kylie screamed, and covered her face; I just closed my eyes and waited and prayed very quickly. The idiot pulled the trigger, and the world turned hell-red. I heard shrieks in German, and opened my eyes hurriedly, in time to see Sergei hit the ground.

Uschi fired a round from the AK-47 an instant too late, and Sergei back-somersaulted and planted his feet firmly in her kidneys. She fell backward through the mouth of the cave, screaming.

The man had dropped the device, and was tearing at his goggles; I was still seeing everything through a blood-red haze, and *I'd* had my eyes closed, so he must have been wondering if he'd been permanently blinded. I took one step toward him, then grabbed his flailing arm, gently twisted it behind his back, and threw him head-first into the side of the ship. When I was convinced he wasn't going to get up again quickly, I asked, "Are you two okay?"

"Yes," replied Kylie. "But I think we'd better stay down here for a while. Sergei?"

"Apart from a pair of fouled trousers," said Sergei, thickly, "I suspect I'm fine. What was that infernal device? A camera?"

"Yeah. With a flashgun."

"How did you know?"

I looked down at the gunman. "It was just a hunch, but . . . *he* was looking for a weapon, so he saw it as a weapon. Barnes was looking for a weapon, so *he* saw it as a weapon. You were scared it might be a weapon,

so you saw it as a weapon. I noticed how much it looked like an old-fashioned movie camera. I looked through the viewfinder, and that confirmed it; it didn't magnify, and the frame was an equilateral triangle, just like the holograms scattered over the floor. Their eyes are obviously very similar to ours, so if it had a flash, at least some of it would be in the visible spectrum. The hard part was working out how to set the flash to maximum power.

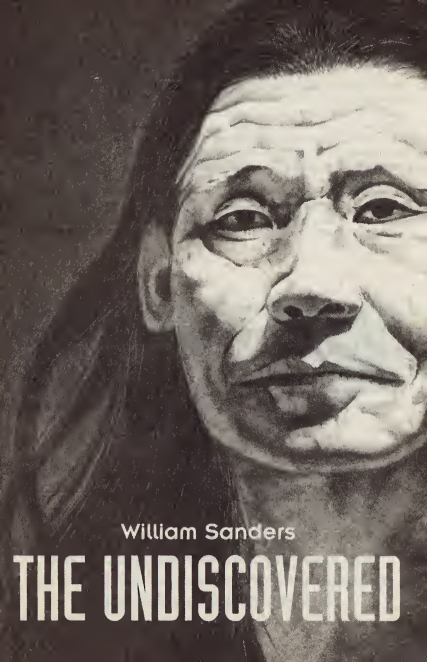
"But even before he brought it out, I thought a camera was more likely than a weapon. There was nothing to suggest they'd be armed. Look at their ship; no weapons, big windows, *lots* of space inside, *lots* of furniture, and it's easier to break into than a rubber dinghy. And look at the junk they collected. They're not explorers, soldiers, spies, scouts . . . they're something much more common in a high-tech world, and infinitely more dangerous."

They sat there for a few seconds, and then Sergei said, "Okay. I'll bite. What are they?"

I smiled. "Tourists." ●



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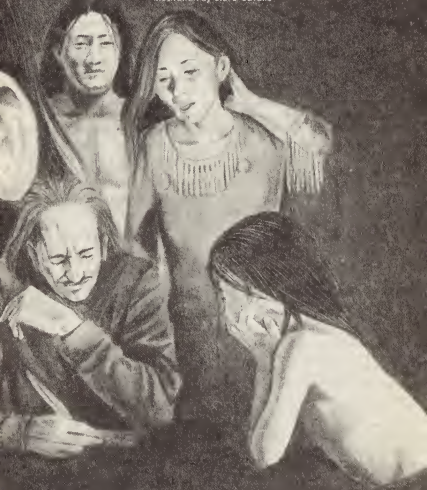


William Sanders

THE UNDISCOVERED

William Sanders, author of fifteen published books, is best known to science fiction fans for the alternate-history comedies *Journey to Fusang* and *The Wild Blue and the Gray*, and for his short stories based on Cherokee tradition. (Two of these stories have appeared in the twelfth and thirteenth editions of the Year's Best Science Fiction.) In his first tale for Asimov's, Mr. Sanders works both veins at once.

Illustration by Steve Cavallo



So the white men are back! And trying once again to build themselves a town, without so much as asking anyone's permission. I wonder how long they will stay this time. It sounds as if these have no more sense than the ones who came before.

They certainly pick the strangest places to settle. Last time it was that island, where anyone could have told them the weather is bad and the land is no good for corn. Now they have invaded Powhatan's country, and from what you say, they seem to have angered him already. Of course that has never been hard to do.

Oh, yes, we hear about these matters up in the hills. Not many of us actually visit the coastal country—I don't suppose there are ten people in this town, counting myself, who have even seen the sea—but you know how these stories travel. We have heard all about your neighbor Powhatan, and you eastern people are welcome to him. Was there ever a chief so hungry for power? Not in my memory, and I have lived a long time.

But we were speaking of the white men. As you say, they are a strange people indeed. For all their amazing weapons and other possessions, they seem to be ignorant of the simplest things. I think a half-grown boy would know more about how to survive. Or how to behave toward other people in their own country.

And yet they are not the fools they appear. Not all of them, at least. The only one I ever knew was a remarkably wise man in many ways.

Do not make that gesture at me. I tell you that there was a white man who lived right here in our town, for more than ten winters, and I came to know him well.

I remember the day they brought him in. I was sitting in front of my house, working on a fish spear, when I heard the shouting from the direction of the town gate. Bigkiller and his party, I guessed, returning from their raid on the Tuscaroras. People were running toward the gate, pouring out of the houses, everyone eager for a look.

I stayed where I was. I could tell by the sound that the raid had been successful—no women were screaming, so none of our people had been killed or seriously hurt—and I didn't feel like spending the rest of the day listening to Bigkiller bragging about his latest exploits.

But a young boy came up and said, "They need you, Uncle. Prisoners."

So I put my spear aside and got up and followed him, wondering once again why no one around this place could be bothered to learn to speak Tuscarora. After all, it is not so different from our tongue, not nearly as hard as Catawba or Maskogi or Shawano. Or your own language, which as you see I still speak poorly.

The captives were standing just inside the gate, guarded by a couple of Bigkiller's brothers, who were holding war clubs and looking fierce, as well as pleased with themselves. There was a big crowd of people by now

and I had to push my way through before I could see the prisoners. There were a couple of scared-looking Tuscarora women—one young and pretty, the other almost my age and ugly as an alligator—and a small boy with his fist stuck in his mouth. Not much, I thought, to show for all this noise and fuss.

Then I saw the white man.

Do you know, it didn't occur to me at first that that was what he was. After all, white men were very rare creatures in those days, even more so than now. Hardly anyone had actually seen one, and quite a few people refused to believe they existed at all.

Besides, he wasn't really white—not the kind of fish-belly white that I'd always imagined, when people talked about white men—at least where it showed. His face was a strange reddish color, like a boiled crawfish, with little bits of skin peeling from his nose. His arms and legs, where they stuck out from under the single buckskin garment he wore, were so dirty and covered with bruises that it was hard to tell what color the skin was. Of course that was true of all of the captives; Bigkiller and his warriors had not been gentle.

His hair was dark brown rather than black, which I thought was unusual for a Tuscarora, though you do see Leni Lenapes and a few Shawanos with lighter hair. It was pretty thin above his forehead, and the scalp beneath showed through, a nasty bright pink. I looked at that and at the red peeling skin of his face, and thought: well done, Bigkiller, you've brought home a sick man. Some lowland skin disease, and what a job it's going to be purifying everything after he dies. . . .

That was when he turned and looked at me with those blue eyes. Yes, blue. I don't blame you; I didn't believe that story either, until I saw for myself. The white men have eyes the color of a sunny sky. I tell you, it is a weird thing to see when you're not ready for it.

Bigkiller came through the crowd, looking at me and laughing. "Look what we caught, Uncle," he said, and pointed with his spear. "A white man!"

"I knew that," I said, a little crossly. I hated it when he called me "Uncle." I hated it when anyone did it, except children—I was not yet *that* old—but I hated it worse when it came from Bigkiller. Even if he was my nephew.

"He was with the Tuscaroras," one of the warriors, Muskrat by name, told me. "These two women had him carrying firewood—"

"Never mind that." Bigkiller gave Muskrat a bad look. No need to tell the whole town that this brave raid deep into Tuscarora country had amounted to nothing more than the ambush and kidnapping of a small wood-gathering party.

To me Bigkiller said, "Well, Uncle, you're the one who knows all tongues. Can you talk with this white-skin?"

I stepped closer and studied the stranger, who looked back at me with those impossible eyes. He seemed unafraid, but who could read expressions on such an unnatural face?

"Who are you and where do you come from?" I asked in Tuscarora.

He smiled and shook his head, not speaking. The woman beside him, the older one, spoke up suddenly. "He doesn't know our language," she said. "Only a few words, and then you have to talk slow and loud, and kick him a little."

"Nobody in our town could talk with him," the younger woman added. "Our chief speaks a little of your language, and one family has a Catawba slave, and he couldn't understand them either."

By now the crowd was getting noisy, everyone pushing and jostling, trying to get a look at the white man. Everyone was talking, too, saying the silliest things. Old Otter, the elder medicine man, wanted to cut the white man to see what color his blood was. An old woman asked Muskrat to strip him naked and find out if he was white all over, though I guessed she was really more interested in learning what his male parts looked like.

The young Tuscarora woman said, "Are they going to kill him?"

"I don't know," I told her. "Maybe."

"They shouldn't," she said. "He's a good slave. He's a hard worker, and he can really sing and dance."

I translated this, and to my surprise Muskrat said, "It is true that he is stronger than he looks. He put up a good fight, with no weapon but a stick of firewood. Why do you think I'm holding this club left-handed?" He held up his right arm, which was swollen and dark below the elbow. "He almost broke my arm."

"He did show spirit," Bigkiller agreed. "He could have run away, but he stayed and fought to protect the women. That was well done for a slave."

I looked at the white man again. He didn't look all that impressive, being no more than medium size and pretty thin, but I could see there were real muscles under that strange skin.

"He can do tricks, too," the young Tuscarora woman added. "He walks on his hands, and—"

The older woman grunted loudly. "He's bad luck, that's what he is. We've had nothing but trouble since he came. Look at us now."

I passed all this along to Bigkiller. "I don't know," he said. "I was going to kill him, but maybe I should keep him as a slave. After all, what other chief among the People has a white slave?"

A woman's voice said, "What's going on here?"

I didn't turn around. I didn't have to. There was no one in our town who would not have known that voice. Suddenly everyone got very quiet.

My sister Tsigeyu came through the crowd, everyone moving quickly out of her way, and stopped in front of the white man. She looked him up

and down and he looked back at her, still smiling, as if pleased to meet her. That showed real courage. Naturally he had no way of knowing that she was the Clan Mother of the Wolf Clan—which, if you don't know, means she was by far the most powerful person in our town—but just the sight of her would have made most people uneasy. Tsigeyu was a big woman, not fat but big like a big man, with a face like a limestone cliff. And eyes that went right through you and made your bones go cold. She died a couple of years ago, but at the time I am telling about she was still in the prime of life, and such gray hairs as she had she wore like eagle feathers.

She said, "For me? Why, thank you, Bigkiller."

Bigkiller opened his mouth and shut it. Tsigeyu was the only living creature he feared. He had more reason than most, since she was his mother.

Muskrat muttered something about having the right to kill the prisoner for having injured him.

Tsigeyu looked at Muskrat. Muskrat got a few fingers shorter, or that was how it looked. But after a moment she said, "It is true you are the nearest thing to a wounded warrior among this brave little war party." She gestured at the young Tuscarora woman. "So I think you should get to keep this girl, here."

Muskrat looked a good deal happier.

"The rest of you can decide among yourselves who gets the other woman, and the boy." Tsigeyu turned to me. "My brother, I want you to take charge of this white man for now. Try to teach him to speak properly. You can do it if anyone can."

KNOWE ALL ENGLISH AND OTHER CHRISTIAN MEN:

That I an Englishman and Subjeckt of Her Maiestie Queene *Elizabeth*, did by Misadventure come to this country of *Virginia* in the Yeere of Our Lord 1591: and after greate Hardshipp arriued amongst these *Indians*. Who haue done me no Harme, but rather shewed me most exelent Kindnesse, sans the which I were like to haue dyed in this Wildernesse. Wherefore, good Frend, I coniure you, that you offer these poore Sauages no Offence, nor do them Iniurie: but rather vse them generously and iustly, as they haue me.

Look at this. Did you ever see the like? He made these marks himself on this deerskin, using a sharpened turkey feather and some black paint that he cooked up from burned wood and oak galls. And he told me to keep it safe, and that if other white men came this way I should show it to them, and it would tell them his story.

Yes, I suppose it must be like a wampum belt, in a way. Or those little

pictures and secret marks that the wise elders of the Leni Lenapes use to record their tribe's history. So clearly he was some sort of *didahnvwisgi*, a medicine man, even though he did not look old enough to have received such an important teaching.

He was always making these little marks, scratching away on whatever he could get—skins, mostly, or mulberry bark. People thought he was crazy, and I let them, because if they had known the truth not even Tsige-yu could have saved him from being killed for a witch.

But all that came later, during the winter, after he had begun to learn our language and I his. On that first day I was only interested in getting him away from that crowd before there was more trouble. I could see that Otter was working himself up to make one of his speeches, and if nothing else that meant there was a danger of being talked to death.

Inside my house I gave the stranger a gourd of water. When he had eased his thirst I pointed to myself. "Mouse," I said, very slowly and carefully. "*Tsis-de-tsi*."

He was quick. "*Tsisdetsi*," he repeated: He got the tones wrong, but it was close enough for a beginning.

I held my hands up under my chin like paws, and pulled my upper lip back to show my front teeth, and crossed my eyes. I waggled one hand behind me to represent a long tail. "*Tsisdetsi*," I said again.

He laughed out loud. "*Tsisdetsi*," he said. "*Mus!*"

He raised his hand and stroked his face for a moment, as if thinking of something. Then without warning he turned and grabbed my best war spear off the wall. My bowels went loose, but he made no move to attack me. Instead he began shaking the weapon above his head with one hand, slapping himself on the chest with the other. "*Tsagspa*," he cried. "*Tsagspa*."

Crazy as a dog on a hot day, I thought at first. They must have hit him too hard. Then I realized what was happening, and felt almost dizzy. It is no small honor when any man tells you his secret war name—but a stranger, and a prisoner!

"*Digatsisdi atelvhvsgo'i*," I said, when I could finally speak. "Shakes Spear!"

I am him that was call'd William Shakspeare, of Stratford-upon-Avon, late of London: a Player, of Lord Strange his Company, and thereby hangs a Tale.

Look there, where I am pointing. That is his name! He showed me that, and he even offered to teach me how to make the marks for my own. Naturally I refused—think what an enemy could do with something like that!

When I pointed this out, he laughed and said I might be right. For, he

said, many a man of his sort had had bad luck with other people making use of his name.

It hapt that our Company was in *Portsmouth*, hauing beene there engaug'd: but then were forbid to play, the Mayor and Corporation of that towne being of the *Puritann* perswasion. For which cause we were left altogether bankrupt: so that some of our Players did pawne their Cloathing for monny to return Home.

Perhaps someone had cursed him, since he sometimes said that he had never meant to leave his own country. It was the fault of the Puritans, he said. He did not explain what this meant, but once he mentioned that his wife and her family were Puritans. So obviously this is simply the name of his wife's clan. Poor fellow, no wonder he left home. The same thing happened to an uncle of mine. When your wife's clan decides to get rid of you, you don't have a chance.

But I, being made foolish by strong Drinke, did conceive to hyde my selfe on a Ship bownd for *London*. Which did seeme a good Idea at the Time: but when I enquiry'd of some sea-faring men, they shewed me (in rogue Jest, or else mayhap I misconstrew'd their Reply, for I was in sooth most outragiously drunk) the *Moonlight*, which lay at the Docke. And so by night I stole aboard, and hid my selfe vnder a Boate: wherevpon the Wine did rush to my heade, and I fell asleepe, and wak'd not till the Morrow: to finde the Ship at sea and vnder Sayle, and the morning Sun at her backe.

Naturally it was a long time before we could understand each other well enough to discuss such things. Not as long as you might think, though. To begin with, I discovered that in fact he had picked up quite a bit of Tuscarora—pretending, like any smart captive, to understand less than he did. Besides that, he was a fast learner: You know that languages are my special medicine—I have heard them say that Mouse can talk to a stone, and get it to talk back—but Spearshaker was gifted too. By the time of the first snow, we could get along fairly well, in a mixture of his language and mine. And when words failed, he could express almost any idea, even tell a story, just by the movements of his hands and body and the expression of his face. That in itself was worth seeing.

When I was discover'd the Master was most wroth, and commanded that I be put to the hardest Labours, and giuen onely the poorest leauings for food. So it went hard for me on that Voy-

age: but the Saylor learn'd that I could sing diuers Songs, and new Ballads from *London*, and then I was vsed better. Anon the Captaine, Mr. Edward *Spicer*, ask'd whether I had any skill in Armes. To which I reply'd, that a Player must needs be a Master of Fence, and of all other Artes martiall, forasmuch as we are wont to play Battles, Duells, Murthers &c. And the Captaine said, that soone I should haue Opportunity to proue my selfe against true Aduersaries and not in play, for we sayl'd for the *Spanish Maine*.

All this time, you understand, there was a great deal of talk concerning the white man. Most of the people came to like him, for he was a friendly fellow and a willing worker. And the Tuscarora girl was certainly right about his singing and dancing. Even Bigkiller had to laugh when Spearshaker went leaping and capering around the fire, and when he walked on his hands and clapped his feet together several women wet themselves—or so I heard.

His songs were strange to the ear, but enjoyable. I remember one we all liked:

"Wid-a-he
An-a-ho
An-a-he-na-ni-no!"

But not everyone was happy about his presence among us. Many of the young men were angry that the women liked him so well, and now and then took him aside to prove it. And old Otter told everyone who would listen that once, long ago, a great band of white men had come up from the south, from the Timucua country, and destroyed the finest towns of the Maskogis, taking many away for slaves and killing the others. And this was true, because when the People moved south they found much of that country empty and ruined.

Spearshaker said that those people were of another tribe, with which his own nation was at war. But not everyone believed him, and Otter kept insisting that white men were simply too dangerous to have around. I began to fear for Spearshaker's life.

At length we came vnto the *Indies*, being there joyn'd by the *Hopewell* and other Ships whose names I knowe not. And we attack'd the Spanish Convoy, and took the Galleon *Buen Jesus*, a rich Pryze: and so it came to pass that Will Shakspeare, Actor, did for his greate folly turn Pyrat vpon the salt Sea.

Then, early next spring, the Catawbias came.

This was no mere raid. They came in force and they hit us fast and hard, killing or capturing many of the people working in the fields before they could reach the town palisade. They rushed out of the woods and swarmed over the palisade like ants, and before we knew it we were fighting for our lives in front of our own houses.

That was when Spearshaker astonished us all. Without hesitating, he grabbed a long pole from the meat-drying racks and went after the nearest Catawba with it, jabbing him hard in the guts with the end, exactly as you would use a spear, and then clubbing him over the head. Then he picked up the Catawba's bow and began shooting.

My friend, I have lived long and seen much, but I never was more surprised than that morning. This pale, helpless creature, who could not chip an arrowhead or build a proper fire or even take five steps off a trail without getting lost—he cut those Catawbas down like rotten cornstalks! He shot one man off the palisade, right over there, from clear down by the council house. I do not think he wasted a single shot. And when he was out of arrows, he picked up a war club from a fallen warrior and joined the rest of us in fighting off the remaining attackers.

Afterward, he seemed not to think he had done anything remarkable. He said that all the men of his land know stick-fighting and archery, which they learn as boys. "I could have done better," he said, "with a long bow, and some proper arrows, from my own country." And he looked sad, as he always did when he spoke of his home.

From that day there was no more talk against Spearshaker. Not long after, Tsigeyu announced that she was adopting him. Since this also made him Bigkiller's brother, he was safe from anyone in our town. It also made me his uncle, but he was kind enough never to call me *edutsi*. We were friends.

Next we turn'd north for *Virginnia*, Capt. *Spicer* hauing a Commission from Sir Walter *Raleigh* to calle vpon the English that dwelt at *Roanoke*, to discouer their condition. The Gales were cruel all along that Coast, and we were oft in grave Peril: but after much trauail we reached *Hatarask*, where the Capitaine sent a party in small Boates, to search out the passage betweene the Islands. And whilst we were thus employ'd, a sudden greate Wind arose and scattered the Boates, many being o'erturned and the Mariners drowned. But the Boate I was in was carry'd many Leagues westward, beyond sight of our Fellowes: so we were cast vpon the Shore of the Maine, and sought shelter in the Mouthe of a Riuer. Anon, going ashore, we were attack'd by Sauages: and all the men were slaine, save onely my selfe.

Poor fellow, he was still a long way from home, and small chance of

ever seeing his own people again. At least he was better off than he had been with the Tuscaroras. Let alone those people on the coast, if they had caught him. Remember the whites who tried to build a town on that island north of Wococon, and how Powhatan had them all killed?

Yet hauing alone escap'd, and making my way for some dayes along the Riuer, I was surprized by *Indians* of another Nation: who did giue me hard vsage, as a Slaue, for well-nigh a Yeere. Vntil I was taken from them by these mine present sauage Hostes: amongst which, for my Sinnes, I am like to liue out my mortall dayes.

I used to have a big pile of these talking skins of his. Not that I ever expected to have a chance to show them to anyone who could understand them—I can't believe the white men will ever come up into the hill country; they seem to have all they can do just to survive on the coast—but I kept them to remember Spearshaker by.

But the bugs and the mice got into them, and the bark sheets went moldy in the wet season, and now I have only this little bundle. And, as you see, some of these are no more than bits and pieces. Like this worm-eaten scrap:

as concerning these *Indians* (for so men call them: but if this be the Lande of *India* I am an Hebrew *Iewe*) they are in their owne Tongue clept *Anni-yawia*. Which is, being interpreted, the True or Principall People. By other Tribes they are named *Chelokee*: but the meaning of this word my frend *Mouse* knoweth not, neyther whence deriued. They

I think one reason he spent so much time on his talking marks was that he was afraid he might forget his own language. I have seen this happen, with captives. That Tuscarora woman who was with him still lives here, and by now she can barely speak ten words of Tuscarora. Though Muskrat will tell you that she speaks our language entirely too well—but that is another story.

Spearshaker did teach me quite a lot of his own language—a very difficult one, unlike any I ever encountered—and I tried to speak it with him from time to time, but it can't have been the same as talking with a man of his own kind. What does it sound like? Ah, I remember so little now. Let me see. . . . "*Holt dai tong, dow hor-son nabe!*" That means, "Shut up, you fool!"

He told me many stories about his native land and its marvels. Some I knew to be true, having heard of them from the coast folk: the great floating houses that spread their wings like birds to catch the wind, and the

magic weapons that make thunder and lightning. Others were harder to believe, such as his tales about the woman chief of his tribe. Not a clan mother, but a real war chief, like Bigkiller or even Powhatan, and so powerful that any man—even an elder or a leading warrior—can lose his life merely for speaking against her.

He also claimed that the town he came from was so big that it held more people than all of the People's towns put together. That is of course a lie, but you can't blame a man for bragging on his own tribe.

But nothing, I think, was as strange as the *plei*.

Forgive me for using a word you do not know. But as far as I know there is no word in your language for what I am talking about. Nor in ours, and this is because the thing it means has never existed among our peoples. I think the Creator must have given this idea only to the whites, perhaps to compensate them for their poor sense of direction and that skin that burns in the sun.

It all began one evening, at the beginning of his second winter with us, when I came in from a council meeting and found him sitting by the fire, scratching away on a big sheet of mulberry bark. Just to be polite I said, "*Gado hadvne?* What are you doing?"

Without looking up he said in his own language, "*Raiting a plei.*"

Now I knew what the first part meant; *rai-ting* is what the whites call it when they make those talking marks. But I had never heard the last word before, and I asked what it meant.

Spearshaker laid his turkey feather aside and sat up and looked at me. "Ah, Mouse," he said, "how can I make you understand? This will be hard even for you."

I sat down on the other side of the fire. "Try," I said.

O what a fond and Moone-struck fool am I! Hath the aire of *Virginnia* addl'd my braine? Or did an Enemy smite me on the heade, and I knewe it not? For here in this wilde country, where e'en the Artes of Letters are altogether unknowne, I haue begun the writing of a Play. And sure it is I shall neuer see it acted, neyther shall any other man: wherefore 'tis Lunacy indeede. Yet me thinkes if I do it not, I am the more certain to go mad: for I find my selfe growing more like vnto these *Indians*, and I feare I may forget what manner of man I was. Therefore the Play's the thing, whereby Ile saue my Minde by intentional folly: forsooth, there's Method in my Madnesse.

Well, he was right. He talked far into the night, and the more he talked the less I understood. I asked more questions than a rattlesnake has scales, and the answers only left me more confused. It was a long time before I began to see it.

Didn't you, as a child, pretend you were a warrior or a chief or maybe a medicine man, and make up stories and adventures for yourself? And your sisters had dolls that they gave names to, and talked to, and so on?

Or . . . let me try this another way. Don't your people have dances, like our Bear Dance, in which a man imitates some sort of animal? And don't your warriors sometimes dance around the fire acting out their own deeds, showing how they killed men or sneaked up on an enemy town—and maybe making it a little better than it really happened? Yes, it is the same with us.

Now this *plei* thing is a little like those dances, and a little like the pretending of children. A group of people dress up in fancy clothes and pretend to be other people, and pretend to do various things, and in this way they tell a story.

Yes, grown men. Yes, right up in front of everybody.

But understand, this isn't a dance. Well, there is some singing and dancing, but mostly they just talk. And gesture, and make faces, and now and then pretend to kill each other. They do a lot of that last. I guess it is something like a war dance at that.

You'd be surprised what can be done in this way. A man like Spearshaker, who really knows how—*ak-ta* is what they are called—can make you see almost anything. He could imitate a man's expression and voice and way of moving—or a woman's—so well you'd swear he had turned into that person. He could make you think he was Bigkiller, standing right there in front of you, grunting and growling and waving his war club. He could do Blackfox's funny walk, or Locust wiggling his eyebrows, or Tsigeyu crossing her arms and staring at somebody she didn't like. He could even be Muskrat and his Tuscarora woman arguing, changing back and forth and doing both voices, till I laughed so hard my ribs hurt.

Now understand this. These *akta* people don't just make up their words and actions as they go along, as children or dancers do. No, the whole story is already known to them, and each *akta* has words that must be said, and things that must be done, at exactly the right times. You may be sure this takes a good memory. They have as much to remember as the Master of the Green Corn Dance.

And so, to help them, one man puts the whole thing down in those little marks. Obviously this is a very important job, and Spearshaker said that it was only in recent times, two or three winters before leaving his native land, that he himself had been accounted worthy of this honor. Well, I had known he was a *didahnwiski*, but I hadn't realized he was of such high rank.

I first purpos'd to compose some pretty conceited Comedy, like vnto my Loue's Labour's Lost: but alas, me seemes my Wit hath dry'd vp from Misfortune. Then I bethought my selfe of the Play

of the Prince of Denmark, by Thomas *Kyd*: which I had been employ'd in reuising for our Company not long ere we departed *London*, and had oft said to Richard *Burbage*, that I trow I could write a Better. And so I haue cominced, and praye God I may compleat, my owne Tragedie of Prince *Hamlet*.

I asked what sort of stories his people told in this curious manner. That is something that always interests me—you can learn a lot about any tribe from their stories. Like the ones the Maskogis tell about Rabbit, or our own tale about the Thunder Boys, or—you know.

I don't know what I was thinking. By then I should have known that white people do *everything* differently from everyone else in the world.

First he started to tell me about a dream somebody had on a summer night. That sounded good, but then it turned out to be about the Little People! Naturally I stopped him fast, and I told him that we do not talk about . . . *them*. I felt sorry for the poor man who dreamed about them, but there was no helping him now.

Then Spearshaker told me a couple of stories about famous chiefs of his own tribe. I couldn't really follow this very well, partly because I knew so little about white laws and customs, but also because a lot of their chiefs seemed to have the same name. I never did understand whether there were two different chiefs named *Ritsad*, or just one with a very strange nature.

The oddest thing, though, was that none of these stories seemed to have any *point*. They didn't tell you why the moon changes its face, or how the People were created, or where the mountains came from, or where the raccoon got his tail, or anything. They were just . . . *stories*. Like old women's gossip.

Maybe I missed something.

~~To liue, or not to liue, there lyes the~~
~~To liue, or dye? Shall I~~
~~To dye or~~
~~To be or what? It~~

He certainly worked hard at his task. More often than not, I could hear him grinding his teeth and muttering to himself as he sat hunched over his marks. And now and then he would jump up and throw the sheet to the ground and run outside in the snow and the night wind, and I would hear him shouting in his own language. At least I took it to be his language, though the words were not among those I knew. Part of his medicine, no doubt, so I said nothing.

God's Teethe! Haue I beene so long in this Wildernesse, that I

haue forgot all Skill? I that could bombast out a lyne of blank
Verse as readily as a Fische doth swimm, now fumble for Wordes
like a Drunkard who cannot finde his owne Cod-peece with both
Handes.

I'm telling you, it was a *long* winter.

For who would thus endure the Paines of time:
To-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow,
That waite in patient and most grim Array,
Each arm'd with Speares and Arrowes of Misfortune;
Like *Indians* ambuscaded in the Forest?
But that the dread of something after Death,
That vndiscovered country, from whose Shores
No Traueller returnes, puzzels the Will,
And makes vs rather beare that which we knowe
Than wantonly embarke for the Vnknowne.

One evening, soon after the snows began to melt, I noticed that Spear-shaker was not at his usual nightly work. He was just sitting there staring into the fire, not even looking at his skins and bark sheets, which were stacked beside him. The turkey feathers and black paint were nowhere in sight.

I said, "Is something wrong?" and then it came to me. "Finished?"

He let out a long sigh. "Yes," he said. "*Mo ful ai*," he added, which was something he often said, though I never quite got what it meant.

It was easy to see he was feeling bad. So I said, "Tell me the story."

He didn't want to, but finally he told it to me. He got pretty worked up as he went along, sometimes jumping up to act out an exciting part, till I thought he was going to wreck my house. Now and then he picked up a skin or mulberry-bark sheet and spoke the words, so I could hear the sound. I had thought I was learning his language pretty well, but I couldn't understand one word in ten.

But the story itself was clear enough. There were parts I didn't follow, but on the whole it was the best he'd ever told me. At the end I said, "Good story."

He tilted his head to one side, like a bird. "Truly?"

"*Doyu*," I said. I meant it, too.

He sighed again and picked up his pile of *raiting*. "I am a fool," he said.

I saw that he was about to throw the whole thing into the fire, so I went over and took it from him. "This is a good thing," I told him. "Be proud."

"Why?" He shrugged his shoulders. "Who will ever see it? Only the bugs and the worms. And the mice," he added, giving me his little smile.

I stood there, trying to think of something to make him feel better. Ninekiller's oldest daughter had been making eyes at Spearshaker lately and I wondered if I should go get her. Then I looked down at what I was holding in my hands and it came to me.

"My friend," I said, "I've got an idea. Why don't we put on your *plei* right here?"

And now is Lunacy compounded vpon Lunacy, *Bedlam* pyled on *Bedlam*: for I am embark'd on an Enterprize, the like of which this Globe hath neuer seene. Yet Ile undertake this Foolery, and flynych not: mayhap it will please these People, who are become my onely Friends. They shall haue of Will his best will.

It sounded simple when I heard myself say it. Doing it was another matter. First, there were people to be spoken with.

We *Aniyuwiya* like to keep everything loose and easy. Our chiefs have far less authority than yours, and even the power of the clan mothers has its limits. Our laws are few, and everyone knows what they are, so things tend to go along without much trouble.

But there were no rules for what we wanted to do, because it had never been done before. Besides, we were going to need the help of many people. So it seemed better to go carefully—but I admit I had no idea that our little proposal would create such a stir. In the end there was a regular meeting at the council house to talk it over.

Naturally it was Otter who made the biggest fuss. "This is white men's medicine," he shouted. "Do you want the People to become as weak and useless as the whites?"

"If it will make all our warriors shoot as straight as Spearshaker," Bigkiller told him, "then it might be worth it."

Otter waved his skinny old arms. He was so angry by now that his face was whiter than Spearshaker's. "Then answer this," he said. "How is it that this dance—"

"It's not a dance," I said. Usually I would not interrupt an elder in council, but if you waited for Otter to finish you might be there all night.

"Whatever you call it," he said, "it's close enough to a dance to be Bird Clan business, right? And you, Mouse, are Wolf Clan—as is your white friend, by adoption. So you have no right to do this thing."

Old Dotsuya spoke up. She was the Bird Clan Mother, and the oldest person present. Maybe the oldest in town, now I think of it.

"The Bird Clan has no objection," she said. "Mouse and Spearshaker have our permission to put on their *plei*. Which I, for one, would like to see. Nothing ever happens around this town."

Tsigeyu spoke next. "*Howa*," she said. "I agree. This sounds interesting."

Of course Otter wasn't willing to let it go so easily; he made quite a speech, going all the way back to the origins of the People and predicting every kind of calamity if this sacrilege was permitted. It didn't do him much good, though. No one liked Otter, who had gotten both meaner and longer-winded with age, and who had never been a very good *didahn-vwisgi* anyway. Besides, half the people in the council house were asleep long before he was done.

After the council gave its approval there was no trouble getting people to help. Rather we had more help than we needed. For days there was a crowd hanging around my house, wanting to be part of the *plei*. Bigkiller said if he could get that many people to join a war party, he could take care of the Catawbas for good.

And everyone wanted to be an *akta*. We were going to have to turn some people away, and we would have to be careful how we did it, or there would be trouble. I asked Spearshaker how many *aktas* we needed. "How many men, that is," I added, as he began counting on his fingers. "The women are a different problem."

He stopped counting and stared at me as if I were wearing owl feathers. Then he told me something so shocking you will hardly believe it. In his country, the women in a *plei* are actually *men wearing women's clothes!*

I told him quick enough that the People don't go in for that sort of thing—whatever they may get up to in certain other tribes—and he'd better not even talk about it around here. Do you know, he got so upset that it took me the rest of the day to talk him out of calling the whole thing off. . . .

Women! Mercifull Jesu! Women, on a Stage, acting in a Play!
I shall feele like an Whore-Master!

Men or women, it was hard to know which people to choose. None of them had ever done anything like this before, so there was no way to know whether they would be any good or not. Spearshaker asked me questions about each person, in white language so no one would be offended: Is he quick to learn? Does he dance or sing well? Can he work with other people, and do as he is told? And he had them stand on one side of the stickball field, while he stood on the other, and made them speak their names and clans, to learn how well their voices carried.

I had thought age would come into it, since the *plei* included both older and younger people. But it turned out that Spearshaker knew an art of painting a man's face, and putting white in his hair, till he might be mistaken for his own grandfather.

No doubt he could have done the same with women, but that wasn't necessary. There were only two women's parts in this story, and we gave the younger woman's part to Ninekiller's daughter Cricket—who would

have hung upside-down in a tree like a possum if it would please Spearshaker—and the older to a cousin of mine, about my age, who had lost her husband to the Shawanos and wanted something to do.

For those who could not be *aktas*, there was plenty of other work. A big platform had to be built, with space cleared around it, and log benches for the people who would watch. There were torches to be prepared, since we would be doing it at night, and special clothes to be made, as well as things like fake spears so no one would get hurt.

Locust and Blackfox were particularly good workers; Spearshaker said it was as if they had been born for this. They even told him that if he still wanted to follow the custom of his own tribe, with men dressed as women, they would be willing to take those parts. Well, I always had wondered about those two.

But Spearshaker was working harder than anyone else. Besides being in charge of all the other preparations, he had to remake his whole *plei* to suit our needs. No doubt he had made a fine *plei* for white men, but for us, as it was, it would never do.

Many a Play haue I reuis'd and amended: cut short or long at the Company's desyre, or alter'd this or that Speeche to please a Player: e'en carued the very Guttes out of a scene on command of the Office of the Reuels, for some imagin'd Sedition or vnseemely Speeche. But now must I out-do all I euer did before, in the making of my *Hamlet* into a thing comprehensible to the *Anni-yawia*. Scarce is there a line which doth not haue to be re-writ: yea, and much ta'en out intire: as, the Play within the Play, which Mouse saith, that none here will vnderstande. And the Scene must be mov'd from *Denmark* to *Virginnia*, and *Elsinore Castle* transformed into an *Indian* towne. For marry, it were Alchemy enow that I should transmute vnletter'd Sauages into tragick Actors: but to make royal *Danskers* of swart-fac'd *Indians* were beyond all Reason. (Speak'st thou now of Reason, Will Shakespere? Is't not ouer-late for that?)

You should have seen us teaching the *aktas* their parts. First Spearshaker would look at the marks and say the words in his language. Then he would explain to me any parts I hadn't understood—which was most of it, usually—and then I would translate the whole thing for the *akta* in our language. Or as close as I could get; there are some things you cannot really interpret. By now Spearshaker was fluent enough to help me.

Then the *akta* would try to say the words back to us, almost always getting it all wrong and having to start again. And later on all the people in the *plei* had to get together and speak their parts in order, and do all

the things they would do in the *plei*, and that was like a bad dream. Not only did they forget their words; they bumped into each other and stepped on each other's feet, and got carried away in the fight parts and nearly killed each other. And Spearshaker would jump up and down and pull his hair—which had already begun to fall out, for some reason—and sometimes weep, and when he had settled down we would try again.

Verily, my lot is harder than that of the *Iewes of Moses*. For Scripture saith, that *Pharo* did command that they make Bricks without Strawe, wherefore their trauail was greate: but now I must make my Bricks, euen without Mudd.

Let me tell you the story of Spearshaker's *plei*.

Once there was a great war chief who was killed by his own brother. Not in a fight, but secretly, by poison. The brother took over as chief, and also took his dead brother's woman, who didn't object.

But the dead man had a son, a young warrior named Amaledi. One night the dead chief appeared to Amaledi and told him the whole story. And, of course, demanded that he do something about it.

Poor Amaledi was in a bad fix. Obviously he mustn't go against his mother's wishes, and kill her new man without her permission. On the other hand, no one wants to anger a ghost—and this one was plenty angry already.

So Amaledi couldn't decide what to do. To make things worse, the bad brother had guessed that Amaledi knew something. He and this really nasty, windy old man named Quolonisi—sounds like Otter—began trying to get rid of Amaledi.

To protect himself Amaledi became a Crazy, doing and saying everything backward, or in ways that made no sense. This made his medicine strong enough to protect him from his uncle and Quolonisi, at least for a time.

Quolonisi had a daughter, Tsigalili, who wanted Amaledi for her man. But she didn't want to live with a Crazy—who does?—and she kept coming around and crying and begging him to quit. At the same time his mother was giving him a hard time for being disrespectful toward her new man. And all the while the ghost kept showing up and yelling at Amaledi for taking so long. It got so bad Amaledi thought about killing himself, but then he realized that he would go to the spirit world, where his father would *never* leave him alone.

So Amaledi thought of a plan. There was a big dance one night to honor the new chief, and some visiting singers from another town were going to take part. Amaledi took their lead singer aside and got him to change the song, telling him the new words had been given to him in a dream. And that night, with the dancers going around the fire and the women

shaking the turtle shells and the whole town watching, the visiting leader sang:

*"Now he pours it,
Now he is pouring the poison,
See, there are two brothers,
See, now there is one."*

That was when it all blew up like a hot rock in a fire. The bad chief jumped up and ran away from the dance grounds, afraid he had just been witched. Amaledi had a big argument with his mother and told her what he thought of the way she was acting. Then he killed Quolonisi. He said it was an accident but I think he was just tired of listening to the old fool.

Tsigalili couldn't stand any more. She jumped into a waterfall and killed herself. There was a fine funeral.

Now Amaledi was determined to kill his uncle. The uncle was just as determined to kill Amaledi, but he was too big a coward to do it himself. So he got Quolonisi's son Panther to call Amaledi out for a fight.

Panther was a good fighter and he was hot to kill Amaledi, because of his father and his sister. But the chief wasn't taking any chances. He put some poison on Panther's spear. He also had a gourd of water, with poison in it, in case nothing else worked.

So Amaledi and Panther painted their faces red and took their spears and faced each other, right in front of the chief's house. Amaledi was just as good as Panther, but finally he got nicked on the arm. Before the poison could act, they got into some hand-to-hand wrestling, and the spears got mixed up. Now Panther took a couple of hits. Yes, with the poisoned spear.

Meanwhile Amaledi's mother got thirsty and went over and took a drink, before anyone could stop her, from the poisoned gourd. Pretty soon she fell down. Amaledi and Panther stopped fighting and rushed over, but she was already dead.

By now they were both feeling the poison themselves. Panther fell down and died. So did Amaledi, but before he went down he got his uncle with the poisoned spear. So in the end *everyone* died.

You do?

Well, I suppose you had to be there.

And so 'tis afoote: to-morrow night we are to perform.
Thank God *Burbage* cannot be there to witness it: for
it were a Question which should come first, that he dye
of Laughter, or I of Shame.

It was a warm and pleasant night. Everyone was there, even Otter. By

the time it was dark all the seats were full and many people were standing, or sitting on the ground.

The platform had only been finished a few days before—with Bigkiller complaining about the waste of timber and labor, that could have gone into strengthening the town's defenses—and it looked very fine. Locust and Blackfox had hung some reed mats on poles to represent the walls of houses, and also to give us a place to wait out of sight before going on. To keep the crowd from getting restless, Spearshaker had asked Dotsuya to have some Bird Clan men sing and dance while we were lighting the torches and making other last preparations.

Then it was time to begin.

What? Oh, no, I was not an *akta*. By now I knew the words to the whole *plei*, from having translated and repeated them so many times. So I stood behind a reed screen and called out the words, in a voice too low for the crowd to hear, when anyone forgot what came next.

Spearshaker, yes. He was the ghost. He had put some paint on his face that made it even whiter, and he did something with his voice that made the hair stand up on your neck.

But in fact everyone did very well, much better than I had expected. The only bad moment came when Amaledi—that was Tsigeyu's son Hummingbird—shouted, "*Na! Dili, dili!*"—"There! A skunk, a skunk!"—and slammed his war club into the wall of the "chief's house," forgetting it was really just a reed mat. And Beartrack, who was being Quolonisi, took such a blow to the head that he was out for the rest of the *plei*. But it didn't matter, since he had no more words to speak, and he made a very good dead man for Amaledi to drag out.

And the people loved it, all of it. How they laughed and laughed! I never heard so many laugh so hard for so long. At the end, when Amaledi fell dead between his mother and Panther and the platform was covered with corpses, there was so much howling and hooting you would have taken it for a hurricane. I looked out through the mats and saw Tsigeyu and Bigkiller holding on to each other to keep from falling off the bench. Warriors were wiping tears from their eyes and women were clutching themselves between the legs and old Dotsuya was lying on the ground kicking her feet like a baby.

I turned to Spearshaker, who was standing beside me. "See," I said. "And you were afraid they wouldn't understand it!"

After that everything got confused for a while. Locust and Blackfox rushed up and dragged Spearshaker away, and the next time I saw him he was down in front of the platform with Tsigeyu embracing him and Bigkiller slapping him on the back. I couldn't see his face, which was hidden by Tsigeyu's very large front.

By then people were making a fuss over all of us. Even me. A Paint

Clan woman, not bad-looking for her age, took me away for some attention. She was limber and had a lot of energy, so it was late by the time I finally got home.

Spearshaker was there, sitting by the fire. He didn't look up when I came in. His face was so pale I thought at first he was still wearing his ghost paint.

I said, "*Gusdi nusdi*? Is something wrong?"

"They laughed," he said. He didn't sound happy about it.

"They laughed," I agreed. "They laughed as they have never laughed before, every one of them. Except for Otter, and no one has ever seen him laugh."

I sat down beside him. "You did something fine tonight, Spearshaker. You made the People happy. They have a hard life, and you made them laugh."

He made a snorting sound. "Yes. They laughed to see us making fools of ourselves. Perhaps that is good."

"No, no." I saw it now. "Is that what you think? That they laughed because we did the *plei* so badly?"

I put my hand on his shoulder and turned him to face me. "My friend, no one there tonight ever saw a *plei* before, except for you. How would they know if it was bad? It was certainly the best *plei* they ever saw."

He blinked slowly, like a turtle. I saw his eyes were red.

"Believe me, Spearshaker," I told him, "they were laughing because it was such a funny story. And that was your doing."

His expression was very strange indeed. "They thought it comical?"

"Well, who wouldn't? All those crazy people up there, killing each other—and themselves—and then that part at the end, where *everyone* gets killed!" I had to stop and laugh, myself, remembering. "I tell you," I said when I had my breath back, "even though I knew the whole thing by memory, I nearly lost control of myself a few times there."

I got up. "Come, Spearshaker. You need to go to sleep. You have been working too hard."

But he only put his head down in his hands and made some odd sounds in his throat, and muttered some words I did not know. And so I left him there and went to bed.

If I live until the mountains fall, I will never understand white men.

If I live vntil our *Saviour's* returne, I shall neuer vnderstande *Indians*. Warre they count as Sport, and bloody Murther an occasion of Merriment: 'tis because they hold Life itselſe but lightly, and think Death no greate matter neyther: and so that which we call Tragick, they take for Comedie. And though I be damned for't, I cannot sweare that they haue not the Right of it.

Whatever happened that night, it changed something in Spearshaker. He lived with us for many more years, but never again did he make a *plei* for us.

That was sad, for we had all enjoyed the Amaledi story so much, and were hoping for more. And many people tried to get Spearshaker to change his mind—Tsige-yu actually begged him; I think it was the only time in her life she ever begged anyone for anything—but it did no good. He would not even talk about it.

And at last we realized that his medicine had gone, and we left him in peace. It is a terrible thing for a *didahnwisi* when his power leaves him. Perhaps his ancestors' spirits were somehow offended by our *plei*. I hope not, since it was my idea.

That summer Ninekiller's daughter Cricket became Spearshaker's wife. I gave them my house, and moved in with the Paint Clan woman. I visited my friend often, and we talked of many things, but of one thing we never spoke.

Cricket told me he still made his talking marks, from time to time. If he ever tried to make another *plei*, though, he never told anyone.

I believe it was five winters ago—it was not more—when Cricket came in one day and found him dead. It was a strange thing, for he had not been sick, and was still a fairly young man. As far as anyone knew there was nothing wrong with him, except that his hair had fallen out.

I think his spirit simply decided to go back to his native land.

Cricket grieved for a long time. She still has not taken another husband. Did you happen to see a small boy with pale skin and brown hair, as you came through our town? That is their son Wili.

Look what Cricket gave me. This is the turkey feather that was in Spearshaker's hand when she found him that day. And this is the piece of mulberry bark that was lying beside him. I will always wonder what it says.

We are such stuff as Dreames are made on: and our little Life
Is rounded in a sle ●

NOTES

1. Elizabethan spelling was fabulously irregular; the same person might spell the same word in various ways on a single page. Shakespeare's own spelling is known only from the Quarto and Folio printings of the plays, and the published poetry; and no one knows how far this may have been altered by the printer. It is not even known how close the published texts are to Shakespeare's original in wording, let alone spelling. All we have in his own hand is his signature, and this indicates that he spelled his own name differently almost every time he wrote it.

I have followed the spelling of the Folio for the most part, but felt free to use my own judgment and even whim, since that was what the original speller did.

I have, however, regularized spelling and punctuation to some extent, and modernized spelling and usage in some instances, so that the text would be readable. I assume this magazine's readership is well-educated, but it seems unrealistic to expect them to be Elizabethan scholars.

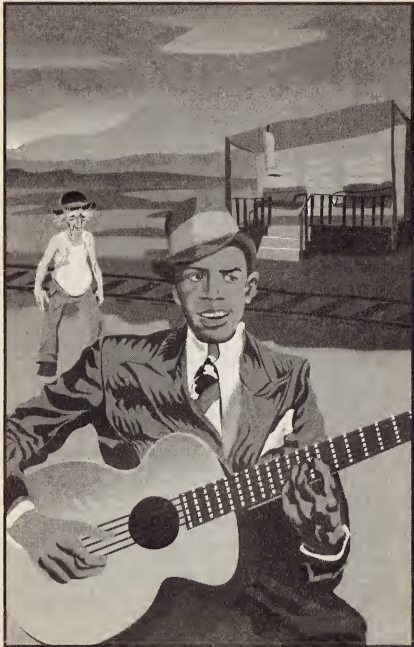
2. Cherokee pronunciation is difficult to render in Roman letters. Even our own syllabary system of writing, invented in the nineteenth century by Sequoyah, does not entirely succeed, as there is no way to indicate the tones and glottal stops. I have followed, more or less, the standard system of transliteration, in which "v" is used for the nasal grunting vowel that has no English equivalent.

It hardly matters, since we do not know how sixteenth-century Cherokees pronounced the language. The sounds have changed considerably in the century and a half since the forced march to Oklahoma; what they were like four hundred years ago is highly conjectural. So is the location of the various tribes of Virginia and the Carolinas during this period; and, of course, so is their culture. (The Cherokees may not then have been the warlike tribe they later became—though, given the national penchant for names incorporating the verb "to kill," this is unlikely.) The Catawbas were a very old and hated enemy.

3. Edward Spicer's voyage to America to learn the fate of the Roanoke Colony—or rather his detour to Virginia after a successful privateering operation—did happen, including the bad weather and the loss of a couple of boats, though there is no record that any boat reached the mainland. The disappearance of the Roanoke colonists is a famous event. It is only conjecture—though based on considerable evidence, and accepted by many historians—that Powhatan had the colonists murdered, after they had taken sanctuary with a minor coastal tribe. Disney fantasies to the contrary, Powhatan was not a nice man.

4. I have accepted, for the sake of the story, the view of many scholars that Shakespeare first got the concept of *Hamlet* in the process of revising Thomas Kyd's earlier play on the same subject. Thus he might well have had the general idea in his head as early as 1591—assuming, as most do, that by this time he was employed with a regular theatrical company—even though the historic *Hamlet* is generally agreed to have been written considerably later.

5. As to those who argue that William Shakespeare was not actually the author of *Hamlet*, but that the plays were written by Francis Bacon or the Earl of Southampton or Elvis Presley, one can only reply: *Hah!* And again, *Hah!*



Andy Duncan

BELUTHAHATCHIE

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Illustration by Anthony Bari

Everybody else got off the train at Hell, but I figured, it's a free country. So I commenced to make myself a mite more comfortable. I put my feet up and leaned back against the window, laid my guitar across my chest and settled in with my hat tipped down over my eyes, almost. I didn't know what the next stop was but I knew I'd like it better than Hell.

Whoo! I never saw such a mess. All that crowd of people jammed together on the Hell platform so tight you could faint standing up. One old battle-hammed woman hollering for Jesus, most everybody else just mumbling and crying and hugging their bags and leaning into each other and waiting to be told where to go. And hot? Man, I ain't just beating my gums there. Not as hot as the Delta, but hot enough to keep old John on the train. No, sir, I told myself, no room out there for me.

Fat old conductor man pushed on down the aisle kinda slow, waiting on me to move. I decided I'd wait on that, too.

"Hey, nigger boy." He slapped my foot with a rolled-up newspaper. Felt like the Atlanta paper. "This ain't no sleeping car."

"Git up off me, man. I ain't done nothing."

"Listen at you. Who you think you are, boy? Think you run the railroad? You don't look nothing like Mr. George Pullman." The conductor tried to put his foot up on the seat and lean on his knee, but he gave up with a grunt.

I ran one finger along my guitar strings, not hard enough to make a sound but just hard enough to feel them. "I ain't got a ticket, neither," I

bit off, "but it was your railroad's pleasure to bring me this far, and it's my pleasure to ride on a little further, and I don't see what cause you got to be so astorperious about it, Mr. Fat Ass."

He started puffing and blowing. "What? What?" He was teakettle hot. You'd think I'd done something. "What did you call me, boy?" He whipped out a strap, and I saw how it was, and I was ready.

"Let him alone."

Another conductor was standing outside the window across the aisle, stooping over to look in. He must have been right tall and right big too, filling up the window like that. Cut off most of the light. I couldn't make out his face, but I got the notion that pieces of it was sliding around, like there wan't quite a face ready to look at yet. "The Boss will pick him up at the next stop. Let him be."

"The Boss?" Fat Ass was getting whiter all the time.

"The Boss said it would please him to greet this nigger personally."

Fat Ass wan't studying about me anymore. He slunk off, looking back big-eyed at the man outside the window. I let go my razor and let my hand creep up out of my sock, slow and easy, making like I was just shifting cause my leg was asleep.

The man outside hollered: "Board! All aboard! Next stop, Beluthahatchie!"

That old mama still a-going. "Jesus! Save us, Jesus!"

"All aboard for Beluthahatchie!"

"Jesus!"

We started rolling out.

"All aboard!"

"Sweet Je—" And her voice cut off just like that, like the squawk of a hen Meemaw would snatch for Sunday dinner. Wan't my business. I looked out the window as the scenery picked up speed. Wan't nothing to see, just fields and ditches and swaybacked mules and people stooping and picking, stooping and picking, and by and by a porch with old folks sitting on shuck-bottomed chairs looking out at all the years that ever was, and I thought I'd seen enough of all that to last me a while. Wan't any of my business at all.

When I woke up I was lying on a porch bench at another station, and hanging on one chain was a blown-down sign that said Beluthahatchie. The sign wan't swinging cause there wan't no breath of air. Not a soul else in sight neither. The tracks ran off into the fields on both ends as far as I could see, but they was all weeded up like no train been through since the Surrender. The windows over my head was boarded up like the bank back home. The planks along the porch han't been swept in years by nothing but the wind, and the dust was in whirly patterns all around.

Still lying down, I reached slowly beneath the bench, groping the air,

till I heard, more than felt, my fingers pluck a note or two from the strings of my guitar. I grabbed it by the neck and sat up, pulling the guitar into my lap and hugging it, and I felt some better.

Pigeons in the eaves was a-fluttering and a-hooting all mournful-like, but I couldn't see 'em. I reckon they was pigeons. Meemaw used to say that pigeons sometimes was the souls of dead folks let out of Hell. I didn't think those folks back in Hell was flying noplase, but I did feel something was wrong, bad wrong, powerful wrong. I had the same crawly feeling as before I took that fatal swig—when Jar Head Sam, that harp-playing bastard, passed me a poisoned bottle at a Mississippi jook joint and I woke up on that one-way train.

Then a big old hound dog ambled around the corner of the station on my left, and another big old hound dog ambled around the corner of the station on my right. Each one was nearabouts as big as a calf and so fat it could hardly go, swanking along with its belly on the planks and its nose down. When the dogs snuffled up to the bench where I was sitting, their legs give out and they flopped down, yawned, grunted, and went fast to sleep like they'd been poleaxed. I could see the fleas hopping across their big butts. I started laughing.

"Lord, the hellhounds done caught up to me now! I surely must have led them a chase, I surely must. Look how wore out they are!" I hollered and cried, I was laughing so hard. One of them broke wind real long, and that set me off again. "Here come the brimstone! Here come the sulfur! Whoo! Done took my breath. Oh, Lordy." I wiped my eyes.

Then I heard two way-off sounds, one maybe a youngun dragging a stick along a fence, and the other maybe a car motor.

"Well, shit," I said.

Away off down the tracks, I saw a little spot of glare vibrating along in the sun. The flappity racket got louder and louder. Some fool was driving his car along on the tracks, a bumpety-bump, a bumpety-bump. It was a Hudson Terraplane, right sporty, exactly like what Peola June used to percolate around town in, and the chrome on the fender and hood was shining like a conk buster's hair.

The hound dogs was sitting up now, watching the car. They was stiff and still on each side of my bench, like deacons sitting up with the dead.

When the car got nigh the platform it lurched up out of the cut, gravel spitting, gears grinding, and shut off in the yard at the end of the porch where I was sitting. Sheets of dust sailed away. The hot engine ticked. Then the driver's door opened, and out slid the devil. I knew him well. Time I saw him slip down off the seat and hitch up his pants, I knew.

He was a sunburnt, bandy-legged, pussel-gutted li'l peckerwood. He wore braces and khaki pants and a dirty white undershirt and a big derby hat that had white hair flying out all around it like it was attached to the brim, like if he'd tip his hat to the ladies his hair would come off too.

He had a bright-red possum face, with beady, dumb black eyes and a long sharp nose, and no chin at all hardly and a big goozlum in his neck that jumped up and down like he couldn't swallow his spit fast enough. He slammed the car door and scratched himself a little, up one arm and then the other, then up one leg till he got to where he liked it. He hunkered down and spit in the dust and looked all unconcerned like maybe he was waiting on a tornado to come along and blow some victuals his way, and he didn't take any more notice of me than the hound dogs had.

I wan't used to being treated such. "You keep driving on the tracks thataway, hoss," I called, "and that Terraplane gone be butt-sprung for sure."

He didn't even look my way. After a long while, he stood up and leaned on a fender and lifted one leg and looked at the bottom of his muddy clodhopper, then put it down and lifted the other and looked at it too. Then he hitched his pants again and headed across the yard toward me. He favored his right leg a little and hardly picked up his feet at all when he walked. He left ruts in the yard like a plow. When he reached the steps, he didn't so much climb 'em as stand his bantyweight self on each one and look proud, like each step was all his'n now, and then go on to claim the next one too. Once on the porch, he sat down with his shoulders against a post, took off his hat and fanned himself. His hair had a better hold on his head than I thought, what there was of it. Then he pulled out a stick and a pocketknife and commenced to whittle. But he did all these things so deliberate and thoughtful that it was almost the same as him talking, so I kept quiet and waited for the words to catch up.

"It will be a strange and disgraceful day unto this world," he finally said, "when I ask a gut-bucket nigger guitar player for advice on auto-MO-bile mechanics, or for anything else except a tune now and again." He had eyes like he'd been shot twice in the face. "And furthermore, I am the Lord of Darkness and the Father of Lies, and if I want to drive my 1936 Hudson Terraplane, with its six-cylinder seventy-horsepower engine, out into the middle of some loblolly and shoot out its tires and rip up its seats and piss down its radiator hole, why, I will do it and do it again seven more times afore breakfast, and the voice that will stop me will not be yourn. You hearing me, John?"

"Ain't my business," I said. Like always, I was waiting to see how it was.

"That's right, John, it ain't your business," the devil said. "Nothing I do is any of your business, John, but everything you do is mine. I was there the night you took that fatal drink, John. I saw you fold when your gut bent double on you, and I saw the shine of your blood coming up. I saw that whore you and Jar Head was squabbling over doing business at your funeral. It was a sorry-ass death of a sorry-ass man, John, and I had a big old time with it."

The hound dogs had laid back down, so I stretched out and rested my feet on one of them. It rolled its eyes up at me like its feelings was hurt.

"I'd like to see old Jar Head one more time," I said. "If he'll be along directly, I'll wait here and meet his train."

"Jar Head's plumb out of your reach now, John," the devil said, still whittling. "I'd like to show you around your new home this afternoon. Come take a tour with me."

"I had to drive fifteen miles to get to that jook joint in the first place," I said, "and then come I don't know how far on the train to Hell and past it. I've done enough traveling for one day."

"Come with me, John."

"I thank you, but I'll just stay here."

"It would please me no end if you made my rounds with me, John." The stick he was whittling started moving in his hand. He had to grip it a little to hang on, but he just kept smiling. The stick started to bleed along the cuts, welling up black red as the blade skinned it. "I want to show off your new home place. You'd like that, wouldn't you, John?" The blood curled down his arm like a snake.

I stood up and shook my head real slow and disgusted, like I was bored by his conjuring, but I made sure to hold my guitar between us as I walked past him. I walked to the porch steps with my back to the devil, and I was headed down them two at a time when he hollered out behind, "John! Where do you think you're going?"

I said real loud, not looking back: "I done enough nothing for one day. I'm taking me a tour. If your ass has slipped between the planks and got stuck, I'll fetch a couple of mules to pull you free."

I heard him cuss and come scrambling after me with that leg a-dragging, sounding just like a scarecrow out on a stroll. I was holding my guitar closer to me all the time.

I wan't real surprised that he let those two hound dogs ride up on the front seat of the Terraplane like they was Mrs. Roosevelt, while I had to walk in the road alongside, practically in the ditch. The devil drove real slow, talking to me out the window the whole time.

"Whyn't you make me get off the train at Hell, with the rest of those sorry people?"

"Hell's about full," he said. "When I first opened for business out here, John, Hell wan't no more'n a wide spot in the road. It took a long time to get any size on it. When you stole that dime from your poor old Meemaw to buy a French post card and she caught you and flailed you across the yard, even way back then, Hell wan't no bigger'n Baltimore. But it's about near more'n I can handle now, I tell you. Now I'm filling up towns all over these parts. Ginny Gall. Diddy-Wah-Diddy. West Hell—I'd run out of ideas when I named West Hell, John."

A horsefly had got into my face and just hung there. The sun was fierce, and my clothes was sticking to me. My razor slid hot along my ankle. I kept favoring my guitar, trying to keep it out of the dust as best I could.

"Beluthahatchie, well, I'll be frank with you, John, Beluthahatchie ain't much of a place. I won't say it don't have possibilities, but right now it's mostly just that railroad station, and a crossroads, and fields. One long, hot, dirty field after another." He waved out the window at the scenery and grinned. He had yellow needly teeth. "You know your way around a field, I reckon, don't you, John?"

"I know enough to stay out of 'em."

His laugh was like a man cutting tin. "I swear you are a caution, John. It's a wonder you died so young."

We passed a right lot of folks, all of them working in the sun. Pulling tobacco. Picking cotton. Hoeing beans. Old folks scratching in gardens. Even younguns carrying buckets of water with two hands, slopping nearly all of it on the ground afore they'd gone three steps. All the people looked like they had just enough to eat to fill out the sad expression on their faces, and they all watched the devil as he drove slowly past. All those folks stared at me hard, too, and at the guitar like it was a third arm waving at 'em. I turned once to swat that blessed horsefly and saw a group of field hands standing in a knot, looking my way and pointing.

"Where all the white folks at?" I asked.

"They all up in heaven," the devil said. "You think they let niggers into heaven?" We looked at each other a long time. Then the devil laughed again. "You ain't buying that one for a minute, are you, John?"

I was thinking about Meemaw. I knew she was in heaven, if anyone was. When I was a youngun I figured she musta practically built the place, and had been paying off on it all along. But I didn't say nothing.

"No, John, it ain't that simple," the devil said. "Beluthahatchie's different for everybody, just like Hell. But you'll be seeing plenty of white folks. Overseers. Train conductors. Sheriff's deputies. If you get uppity, why, you'll see whole crowds of white folks. Just like home, John. Everything's the same. Why should it be any different?"

"'Cause you're the devil," I said. "You could make things a heap worse."

"Now, could I really, John? Could I really?"

In the next field, a big man with hands like gallon jugs and a pink splash across his face was struggling all alone with a spindly mule and a plow made out of slats. "Get on, sir," he was telling the mule. "Get on with you." He didn't even look around when the devil come chugging up alongside.

The devil gummed two fingers and whistled. "Ezekiel. Ezekiel! Come on over here, boy."

Ezekiel let go the plow and stumbled over the furrows, stepping high and clumsy in the thick dusty earth, trying to catch up to the Terraplane and not mess up the rows too bad. The devil han't slowed down any—in fact, I believe he had speeded up some. Left to his own doin's, the mule headed across the rows, the plow jerking along sideways behind him.

"Yessir?" Ezekiel looked at me sorta curious like, and nodded his head so slight I wondered if he'd done it at all. "What you need with me, boss?"

"I wanted you to meet your new neighbor. This here's John, and you ain't gone believe this, but he used to be a big man in the jook joints in the Delta. Writing songs and playing that dimestore git fiddle."

Ezekiel looked at me and said, "Yessir, I know John's songs." And I could tell he meant more than hearing them.

"Yes, John mighta been famous and saved enough whore money to buy him a decent instrument if he hadn't up and got hisself killed. Yes, John used to be one high-rolling nigger, but you ain't so high now, are you John?"

I stared at the li'l peckerwood and spit out: "High enough to see where I'm going, Ole Massa."

I heard Ezekiel suck in his breath. The devil looked away from me real casual and back to Ezekiel, like we was chatting on a veranda someplace.

"Well, Ezekiel, this has been a nice long break for you, but I reckon you ought to get on back to work now. Looks like your mule's done got loose." He cackled and speeded up the car. Ezekiel and I both walked a few more steps and stopped. We watched the back of the Terraplane getting smaller, and then I turned to watch his face from the side. I han't seen that look on any of my people since Mississippi.

I said, "Man, why do you all take this shit?"

He wiped his forehead with his wrist and adjusted his hat. "Why do you?" he asked. "Why do you, John?" He was looking at me strange, and when he said my name it was like a one-word sentence all its own.

I shrugged. "I'm just seeing how things are. It's my first day."

"Your first day will be the same as all the others, then. That sure is the story with me. How come you called him Ole Massa just now?"

"Don't know. Just to get a rise out of him, I reckon."

Away off down the road, the Terraplane had stopped, engine still running, and the little cracker was yelling. "John! You best catch up, John. You wouldn't want me to leave you wandering in the dark, now would you?"

I started walking, not in any gracious hurry though, and Ezekiel paced me. "I asked 'cause it put me in mind of the old stories. You remember those stories, don't you? About Ole Massa and his slave by name of John? And how they played tricks on each other all the time?"

"Meemaw used to tell such when I was a youngun. What about it?"

He was trotting to keep up with me now, but I wan't even looking his

way. "And there's older stories than that, even. Stories about High John the Conqueror. The one who could—"

"Get on back to your mule," I said. "I think the sun has done touched you."

"—the one who could set his people free," Ezekiel said, grabbing my shoulder and swinging me around. He stared into my face like a man looking for something he's dropped and has got to find.

"John!" the devil cried.

We stood there in the sun, me and Ezekiel, and then something went out of his eyes, and he let go and walked back across the ditch and trudged after the mule without a word.

I caught up to the Terraplane just in time for it to roll off again. I saw how it was, all right.

A ways up the road, a couple of younguns was fishing off the right side of a plank bridge, and the devil announced he would stop to see had they caught anything, and if they had, to take it for his supper. He slid out of the Terraplane, with it still running, and the dogs fell out after him, a-hoping for a snack, I reckon. When the devil got hunkered down good over there with the younguns, facing the swift-running branch, I sidled up the driver's side of the car, eased my guitar into the back seat, eased myself into the front seat, yanked the thing into gear and drove off. As I went past I saw three round O's—a youngun and the devil and a youngun again.

It was a pure pleasure to sit down, and the breeze coming through the windows felt good too. I commenced to get even more of a breeze going, on that long, straightaway road. I just could hear the devil holler back behind:

"John! Get your handkerchief-headed, free-school Negro ass back here with my auto-MO-bile! Johhhhnnn!"

"Here I come, old hoss," I said, and I jerked the wheel and slewed that car around and barreled off back toward the bridge. The younguns and the dogs was ahead of the devil in figuring things out. The younguns scrambled up a tree as quick as squirrels, and the dogs went loping into a ditch, but the devil was all preoccupied, doing a salty jump and cussing me for a dadblasted blagstaggering liver-lipped stormbuzzard, jigging around right there in the middle of the bridge, and he was still cussing when I drove full tilt onto that bridge and he did not cuss any less when he jumped clean out from under his hat and he may even have stepped it up some when he went over the side. I heard a ker-plunk like a big rock chunked into a pond just as I swerved to bust the hat with a front tire and then I was off the bridge and racing back the way we'd come, and that hat mashed in the road behind me like a possum.

I knew something simply awful was going to happen, but man! I slapped the dashboard and kissed my hand and slicked it back across my

hair and said aloud, "Lightly, slightly, and politely." And I meant that thing. But my next move was to whip that razor out of my sock, flip it open and lay it on the seat beside me, just in case.

I came up the road fast, and from way off I saw Ezekiel and the mule planted in the middle of his field like rocks. As they got bigger I saw both their heads had been turned my way the whole time, like they'd started looking before I even came over the hill. When I got level with them I stopped, engine running, and leaned on the horn until Ezekiel roused himself and walked over. The mule followed behind, like a yard dog, without being cussed or hauled or whipped. I must have been a sight. Ezekiel shook his head the whole way. "Oh, John," he said. "Oh, my goodness. Oh, John."

"Jump in, brother," I said. "Let Ole Massa plow this field his own damn self."

Ezekiel rubbed his hands along the chrome on the side of the car, swiping up and down and up and down. I was scared he'd burn himself. "Oh, John." He kept shaking his head. "John tricks Ole Massa again. High John the Conqueror rides the Terraplane to glory."

"Quit that, now. You worry me."

"John, those songs you wrote been keeping us going down here. Did you know that?"

"I 'preciate it."

"But lemme ask you, John. Lemme ask you something before you ride off. How come you wrote all those songs about hellhounds and the devil and such? How come you was so sure you'd be coming down here when you died?"

I fidgeted and looked in the mirror at the road behind. "Man, I don't know. Couldn't imagine nothing else. Not for me, anyway."

Ezekiel laughed once, loud, boom, like a shotgun going off.

"Don't be doing that, man. I about jumped out of my britches. Come on and let's go."

He shook his head again. "Maybe you knew you was needed down here, John. Maybe you knew we was singing, and telling stories, and waiting." He stepped back into the dirt. "This is your ride, John. But I'll make sure everybody knows what you done. I'll tell 'em that things has changed in Beluthahatchie." He looked off down the road. "You'd best get on. Shoot—maybe you can find some jook joint and have some fun afore he catches up to you."

"Maybe so, brother, maybe so."

I han't gone two miles afore I got that bad old crawly feeling. I looked over to the passengers' side of the car and saw it was all spattered with blood, the leather and the carpet and the chrome on the door, and both those mangy hound dogs was sprawled across the front seat wallowing in it, both licking my razor like it was something good, and that's where the

blood was coming from, welling up from the blade with each pass of their tongues. Time I caught sight of the dogs, they both lifted their heads and went to howling. It wan't no howl like any dog should howl. It was more like a couple of panthers in the night.

"Hush up, you dogs!" I yelled. "Hush up, I say!"

One of the dogs kept on howling, but the other looked me in the eyes and gulped air, his jowls flapping, like he was fixing to bark, but instead of barking said:

"Hush yourself, nigger."

When I looked back at the road, there wan't no road, just a big thicket of bushes and trees a-coming at me. Then came a whole lot of screeching and scraping and banging, with me holding onto the wheel just to keep from flying out of the seat, and then the car went sideways and I heard an awful bang and a crack and then I didn't know anything else. I just opened my eyes later, I don't know how much later, and found me and my guitar lying on the shore of the Lake of the Dead.

I had heard tell of that dreadful place, but I never had expected to see it for myself. Preacher Dodds whispered to us younguns once or twice about it, and said you have to work awful hard and be awful mean to get there, and once you get there, there ain't no coming back. "Don't seek it, my children, don't seek it," he'd say.

As far as I could see, all along the edges of the water, was bones and carcasses and lumps that used to be animals—mules and horses and cows and coons and even little dried-up birds scattered like hickory chips, and some things lying away off that might have been animals and might not have been, oh Lord, I didn't go to look. A couple of buzzards was strolling the edge of the water, not acting hungry nor vicious but just on a tour, I reckon. The sun was setting, but the water didn't cast no shine at all. It had a dim and scummy look, so flat and still that you'd be tempted to try to walk across it, if any human could bear seeing what lay on the other side. "Don't seek it, my children, don't seek it." I han't sought it, but now the devil had sent me there, and all I knew to do was hold my guitar close to me and watch those buzzards a-picking and a-pecking and wait for it to get dark. And Lord, what would this place be like in the dark?

But the guitar did feel good up against me thataway, like it had stored up all the songs I ever wrote or sung to comfort me in a hard time. I thought about those field hands a-pointing my way, and about Ezekiel sweating along behind his mule, and the way he grabbed ahold of my shoulder and swung me around. And I remembered the new song I had been fooling with all day in my head while I was following that li'l peckerwood in the Terraplane.

"Well, boys," I told the buzzards, "if the devil's got some powers I reckon I got some, too. I didn't expect to be playing no blues after I was dead.

But I guess that's all there is to play now. 'Sides, I've played worse places."

I started humming and strumming, and then just to warm up I played "Rambling on My Mind" cause it was, and "Sweet Home Chicago" cause I figured I wouldn't see that town no more, and "Terraplane Blues" on account of that damn car. Then I sang the song I had just made up that day.

*I'm down in Beluthahatchie, baby,
Way out where the trains don't run
Yes, I'm down in Beluthahatchie, baby,
Way out where the trains don't run
Who's gonna take you strolling now
Since your man he is dead and gone*

*My body's all laid out mama
But my soul can't get no rest
My body's all laid out mama
But my soul can't get no rest
Cause you'll be sportin with another man
Lookin for some old Mr. Second Best*

*Plain folks got to walk the line
But the Devil he can up and ride
Folks like us we walk the line
But the Devil he can up and ride
And I won't never have blues enough
Ooh, to keep that Devil satisfied.*

When I was done it was black dark and the crickets was zinging and everything was changed.

"You can sure get around this country," I said, "just a-sitting on your ass."

I was in a cane-back chair on the porch of a little wooden house, with bugs smacking into an oil lamp over my head. Just an old cropper place, sitting in the middle of a cotton field, but it had been spruced up some. Somebody had swept the yard clean, from what I could see of it, and on a post above the dipper was a couple of yellow flowers in a nailed-up Chase & Sanborn can.

When I looked back down at the yard, though, it wan't clean anymore. There was words written in the dirt, big and scrawly like from someone dragging his foot.

DON'T GET A BIG HEAD JOHN
I'LL BE BACK

Sitting on my name was those two fat old hound dogs. "Get on with

your damn stinking talking selves," I yelled, and I shied a rock at them. It didn't go near as far as I expected, just sorta plopped down into the dirt, but the hounds yawned and got up, snuffling each other, and waddled off into the dark.

I stood up and stretched and mumbled. But something was still shifting in the yard, just past where the light was. Didn't sound like no dogs, though.

"Who that? Who that who got business with a wore out dead man?"

Then they come up toward the porch a little closer where I could see. It was a whole mess of colored folks, men in overalls and women in aprons, granny women in bonnets pecking the ground with walking sticks, younguns with their bellies pookin out and no pants on, an old man with Coke-bottle glasses and his eyes swimming in your face nearly, and every last one of them grinning like they was touched. Why, Preacher Dodds woulda passed the plate and called it a revival. They massed up against the edge of the porch, crowding closer in and bumping up against each other, and reaching their arms out and taking hold of me, my lapels, my shoulders, my hands, my guitar, my face, the little ones ahold of my pants legs—not hauling on me or messing with me, just touching me feather light here and there like Meemaw used to touch her favorite quilt after she'd already folded it to put away. They was talking, too, mumbling and whispering and saying, "Here he is. We heard he was coming and here he is. God bless you friend, God bless you brother, God bless you son." Some of the womenfolks was crying, and there was Ezekiel, blowing his nose on a rag.

"Y'all got the wrong man," I said, directly, but they was already heading back across the yard, which was all churned up now, no words to read and no pattern neither. They was looking back at me and smiling and touching, holding hands and leaning into each other, till they was all gone and it was just me and the crickets and the cotton.

Wan't nowhere else to go, so I opened the screen door and went on in the house. There was a bed all turned down with a feather pillow, and in the middle of the checkered oilcloth on the table was a crock of molasses, a jar of buttermilk, and a plate covered with a rag. The buttermilk was cool like it had been chilling in the well, with water beaded up on the sides of the jar. Under the rag was three hoecakes and a slab of bacon.

When I was done with my supper, I latched the front door, lay down on the bed and was just about dead to the world when I heard something else out in the yard—swish, swish, swish. Out the window I saw, in the edge of the porch light, one old granny woman with a shuck broom, smoothing out the yard where the folks had been. She was sweeping it as clean as for company on a Sunday. She looked up from under her bonnet and showed me what teeth she had and waved from the wrist like a youngun, and then she backed on out of the light, swish swish swish, rubbing out her tracks as she went. ●

NEXT ISSUE

Well, it's hard to believe that Asimov's has been around and open for business for twenty years now, but it has, and so our next issue, our April issue, is our Twentieth Anniversary issue—and, in honor of that, we're bringing you some great stories by some of the best of today's writers, as well as the final story by one of yesterday's fallen giants.

APRIL LEAD STORY

Hot British writer **Paul J. McAuley**, one of the most respected new SF writers of the '90s, a specialist in updated wide-screen Space Opera, the kind of stuff sometimes called "radical hard science," takes us on a journey across space to the furthest reaches of the Solar System for a sizzling, suspenseful, and richly inventive tale of high-tech intrigue and counter-intrigue beneath the frozen surface of Proteus, in "Second Skin."

HOT-TICKET WRITERS

L. Timmel Duchamp returns with a powerful and hard-hitting new novella that gives us a disturbing vision of a troubled future America where you do what you have to in order to survive, even if what you have to do turns out to be something as dicey and dangerous as "Quinn's Deal"; the late **John Brunner** was one of the giants of the field, the Hugo-winning author of *Stand on Zanzibar*, and next issue we're honored to be able to bring you his lost published story, a compelling study of "Blood and Judgment"; **Jack McDevitt** takes us to a strange far future haunted by the ghosts of the distant past, where a discouraged young explorer is given some reasons why you should "Never Despair"; acclaimed British writer **Ian R. MacLeod** carries us back to the melancholy days of World War I to witness a young boy's evocative and bittersweet stroll along "The Roads"; and **Mark W. Tiedemann** spins a tale of family loyalty and the sometimes bitter consequences of political change, in "Rust Castles."

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column treats us to some "Coming Attractions"; plus **Paul Di Filippo** with "On Books," and an array of cartoons, poems, letters, and other features.

EXCITING FEATURES

Look for our April issue on sale on your newsstand on February 25, 1997, or subscribe today and be sure to miss none of the great stories that we have coming up for you this year!

Ian McDonald

In the future we may be able to erase the past,
but that won't stop it from coming : . .

AFTER KERRY

Illustration by Darryl Elliott





ELLIOTT 96

November is the dying season in our family. The light fades out of us, we grow pale and cold and fall like leaves. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins accidentally killed; all the dead of November. Now, my mother.

It's a good month for burying, November. The low between-light of autumn-going-winter shows the bones and struts of things; the land, the things growing from it, the people standing on it. Ireland is a country that looks best by winter light, stripped bare of leaves and greenery, spare and strong and good. We buried Ma beneath an intense blue sky, the golden light casting long shadows on the grave grass from the marble Jesuses and alabaster angels and our overcoated figures around the hole. Family, the few living relatives, Father Horan. No friends. My mother had never had a friend she had not alienated in the end.

The dying had been painful and long and inevitable. Ironical, mostly. Every time one of us had tried to break away from that dark little house full of the smell of frying food, she had found a lump, or noticed a mole had grown larger, or had pains in her stomach, or passed blood. And she would reel us in from wherever we hoped to escape to. Dangerous, to invoke the name of the angel of carcinoma. He flies in tandem with the angel of poetic justice. November is his favorite month.

Kerry had broken the tether. She flew free.

Father Horan sprinkled the box with water, and they put Ma down into the black pit and shoveled the earth over her, and I did not feel a thing. Da stood, shoulders slumped, watching the Father roll up his stole, and I knew he felt as I did. It was like God had died and left us all to our own wills and consciences, but we could not believe the infinity of the universe we had been let play in.

Louise was crying; shuddering heaves and sighs. She was doing it for those of us who would not. She probably blamed herself for the cancer, somehow.

A small flock of starlings dashed over the cemetery. Symbol of a soul in flight, to the ancient Greeks. Metempsychosis. She'd always hated it when she thought I was showing off. Mr. Too-Big-For-His-Boots. Knows everything, but knows nothing. Ma had never allowed us to enjoy anything she lacked. Including education. We learned to temper our ambitions to her jealousy. The soul of Aeschylus, Ovid, Whitman, Heaney, at the batch desk in the Allied Irish bank.

"Metempsychosis," I whispered, because I was free to.

"What?" Da grunted.

"Transmigration of the soul. The spirit moving from one body to another."

The birds went with a flash of wings over the brick chimney of the crematorium and swooped away, calling to each other.

In the car park, Father Horan shook our hands with pleasing firmness. Another surprise, he drove away in a red Toyota sports model.

"I thought Kerry might have made it," Da said.

"How?"

"Seen the notice, maybe."

"We don't even know she's still in this country. It's been three years."

Three years of something more than silence. By gesture and expression and mood and sigh, Ma taught us that Kerry was dead, to her, and so to us. But you talk about the dead, you remember them, fondly or not; their spirits haunt you. Kerry was an exorcised ghost. A never-existed. An unconceived child.

I had called at her flat, a few days after the night of the argument, to convince her that it was unnatural for a daughter to swear never to see her mother again. "Kerry doesn't live here anymore," Michaela her flat-mate had said. She was as surprised as I. No warning, no preparations, no forwarding address. Gone.

I can still see Kerry's room. October sunlight through a leaded window; dusty sneaker-prints on the boards; closets and drawers open, bed stripped down to the stained, candy-striped mattress. Rectangular pink nipples of sticky fixers where pictures had been taken down; the patches of unfaded wall color beneath. The light struck a glint from the far baseboard. A brooch: a tiny, silver, winged bird in flight. Overlooked, or a parting message?

I still have that brooch.

I called her job. She had quit her job. Her boss talked to me as if, being blood of her blood, I was complicit in her disappearance. No notice, no explanation, no excuses, no point of contact. Gone.

We could have found her. We could have contacted friends, lovers, work mates; asked at other studios if Kerry had approached them. We could have posted her missing with the police and watched for her face to appear on the side of the morning milk carton. We could have searched for her through the information net that weaves our lives so tightly that none drop through it. We didn't. On a brilliant November morning in the car park of the cemetery in which the mother I hated lay stuffed under wet soil, I understood. We were afraid to find her. That would have meant talking, and questions, and answers to those questions that might upset the miserable equilibrium of our family. Better to let one go than risk the unacceptable truth.

Louise was sniffing again. Little hankie job. Declan was holding her to him but he knew the smell of political tears. Sean and Liam stood in their weddings-and-funerals suits, wanting Daddy to tell them they could get into the car. To them, Nan had been a horror of their noise, a list of Do-Not-Disturb injunctions, dreadful chicken dinners they had to eat *every last fragment of*, and the oily, post-menopausal smell of old woman. They wouldn't miss her.

No one would.

"She should know," Da said. "Kerry. She should know."

"About Ma?"

He shook his head.

"That she can come *back*. That we want her back; that it's all right now, she's gone; maybe now we can be the family we should have been. Only . . ."

"Only what?"

"I can't do it. I can't face her. I wouldn't know what to do. Stephen, would you?"

My family role had always been the burier of dead animals, the shoveler of shit, the cleaner of vomit. In latter days, the mediator, the ambassador. Another role now: the releaser of exiles.

I have several other lives that orbit at varying distances around this one that is my day-to-day experience. The Poet is closest; more a moon than another world. I can look at it, study its features, imagine how I might reach it some day. I am some way toward it, building a tower of file-block sheets and Post-it notes up which I might climb, if the vertigo does not overcome me. The Great Detective Story Writer is more remote, little more than Friday afternoon imaginings, when the clock drags and I try to think of a more satisfying Monday than the one in which I return to this desk and terminal. I could never reach that world: if I had failed to be the accountant I was expected to be, I could not possibly be a success at anything else. But the sun of this private pre-Copernican universe was gone, the gravitations rearranged, and I found I had become my own detective hero.

I set out in search of Kerry in the way I knew best: feeling the vibrations of her passage through the web of digital transactions that is twenty-first-century banking. The transition between our old, screen-based system and the new "virtual interactive consensus transactional financial interface" (high managementese fringes on perversely beautiful poetry) was a good time to conduct illicit searches through the system. The managers smile beatifically beneath their blank plastic virtuality visors as they wave their manipulator-gloved hands, conducting the waltz of the billions. Ludicrous. But it's computers, and therefore beyond criticism, and the consultants are taking twelve million off us, so it's higher even than papal infallibility. This old Luddite moved his stylus across the mat and hunted for his sister. Windmill Animations, Kerry's erstwhile studio, was a customer of our Bellfield branch. It was not even morally dubious to tap through into its records and access the payroll accounts. The guilt started when I used bank authorizations to locate Kerry's account in the Rathmines branch of the Bank of Ireland. The blank virtuality visors were one-way mirror shades, watching me, unseen. I've spent all my life feeling guilty about one triviality or another. A higher level of authoriza-

tion accessed the Rathmines account. Kerry had closed it almost nine months ago. Two more weeks and the inactive file record would have been automatically deleted. No outstanding debts, no credit arrangements, no explanation. But an address. A flat, in Rathmines. Belgrave Road. Five minutes' walk from this desk. Left at the Chinese take-away. Past the bun shop that did the ecstatic eclairs. Past the over-priced mini-mart that had kept the same packet of oatmeal in the window so long the Scotsman on the front had faded into something by Andy Warhol. Across Palmerstown Road at the stop where I waited for the bus five nights a week. Ten houses down on the left, up the steps, ring the top button.

My sister.

I imagined all the pupils in the watching, knowing eyes behind the visors dilating in astonishment.

When I left that afternoon, I did not stop at the bus shelter. I crossed Palmerstown Road. I went up into the *terra incognita* on the other side of the street. I did not expect to find Kerry still there, but I hoped, and because I hoped, I was afraid. I rehearsed it past the Chinese take-away, and re-rehearsed it by Mrs. Ecstatic Eclairs, threw it all out by the Andy Warhol Scots Porage Oats man, drafted new opening lines as I dodged the traffic on Palmerstown Road, and was up the steps at the white Georgian door of number 20, pressing the button for Flat Five, suddenly sick at heart because I did not know how to greet my sister after three years of banishment.

Feet clattered down the stairs. The inner door opened, then the outer. "Ya?"

The hair had to be a wig, or grafted extensions. Crow black, it hung to mid thigh. The face inside it was a pixie's; features flattened, widened by make-up. All slants and slits and smears. Elf-thing. The kid wore a half-disintegrated lace body-stocking, more hole than whole, stretch spider-web. A nipple protruded through the mesh, erect in the cold November air. Rosebud in winter. The fingernails were chromed.

It was not her.

"Wa?"

Their title escapes me, but their theology made an impression on my memory. On a planet orbiting the star Epsilon Eridani live an immeasurably wise and ancient avian race of great beneficence who tour the cosmos by astral projection. Channeling themselves into the bodies of Earthly hosts, they do good and work wonders and bestow the graces of their limitless wisdom and slowly uplift humanity to cosmic consciousness. Alien ambassadors. Walk-ins.

Post-Catholic Ireland's cultural diversity policy has made it a haven for sub-cultures. From across Europe, and beyond, they come to build their communities and live their alternative life-styles and explore different ways of being human. We are becoming a nation of tribes. So said the

Sunday color supplement article in which I read about the Epsilon Eridani walk-ins, and some of the other, more bizarre, societies.

"I'm looking for my sister," I said.

"Tarroweep."

My turn to grunt the monosyllabic response.

"This is Tarroweep," the kid said. "Whatever you want, you say to her."

"My sister. Kerry O'Neill."

"Wa?"

The ancient wisdoms of Epsilon Eridani were not manifesting much of their cosmic consciousness this evening.

"Kerry. My sister. She lives here."

"Tarroweep does not recognize this entity."

"Well, she may have lived here. About nine months ago?"

"Tarroweep does not recognize this entity. Tarroweep has occupied this nest for four years."

"Her address is here." Perhaps she thought I was a debt collector, or a persistent ex-boyfriend, or a Jehovah's Witness, and this was an original anti-door-stepping tactic. "Listen, I'm her brother. I'd just like to see her, that's all. I've got some news for her." I thought about my news. "Good news."

"Tarroweep does not recognize this entity. Tarroweep has occupied this nest for four years."

"Maybe you don't know her as Kerry." The great detective had forgotten to bring a photograph with him. "She looks like me."

The space-pixie that called herself Tarroweep frowned as she studied my face. Her nostrils flared, she seemed to be scenting me.

"There is no Kerry," she said flatly.

I saw a figure move across the top of the stairs.

"Kerry?" I shouted. "Hello! It's me! Stephen."

The figure moved back to the top of the stairs and descended halfway. It wore the same mane of black hair but was dressed in leather pants and jacket. The jacket was open. The chest was bare. It was not Kerry.

"You are disturbing the ambassador," the boy said. "She should not be disturbed when channeling. It's dangerous."

The pixie-thing at the door half-smiled, half-grimaced.

"Ya," the ambassador to Sol Three said. The door closed.

Birds of ill omen flew over me as I walked to the bus stop. Black birds. I felt lied to; mocked. I wanted to go back and shake that silly space-pixie girl until the cosmic intellect from Epsilon Eridani was shaken out of her and I could tell her that the computer said that Kerry O'Neill had lived in the top flat for the past two and a bit years, and the computers always spoke the truth. I raged inwardly and clenched my fists and shook as the bus lurched through the dark avenues of south Dublin. It was not silly Tarroweep in her ridiculous costume with her flatline answers that I was angry at. It was too much anger for her. I raged for the

two and something years that Kerry had lived one minute beyond the boundary of my world, and that the courage to cross it had come too late.

I lose days to an anger attack. The anger itself, then the guilt at having been angry, then the depression after the guilt. And after the depression, the realization that the search was not over. Kerry's account had shown a regular weekly payment of fifty pounds to a consistent account number. A few minutes of dread and digits under the eyeless gaze of the Allied Irish's virtuality visors gave me that account number and name. Dr. Matthew Collins, working out of an address on Fitzwilliam Square. I cross checked with the Golden Pages. Not an MD. A psychotherapist.

I hesitated days over arranging the meeting with Dr. Collins. You do not like to think of one of your family seeing a psychotherapist. It feels unclean, unnatural. Polluted with a rainbow oil-film of madness. Ma had always dreaded madness in the family, twining its roots around our DNA. Whispered-of relatives had been institutionalized. Auntie Mary had been taken away for eating a pair of curtains. We'd laughed; once and only once. You didn't laugh about mental illness in our family. You didn't talk about it at all; while Ma twitched and shrieked about her nerves, her *nerves*, and took to her bed because a dog was barking in the street or we were shouting while she was trying to watch *Fair City*.

Pity the carcinoma angel took her before the angel of paranoia.

Fitzwilliam Square is the handsomest of Dublin's many handsome squares, but the November light lends a particular radiance to the Georgian townhouses. The red brick releases a generous, sun-warmed aura. The white window frames glow. The palings and iron balconies cast long, military shadows.

Dr. Collins's office was on the top floor. His consulting room overlooked the railed-off key park in the center of the square. A couple of valiant residents were making the most of the rare sun by playing out-of-season tennis in the little gravel court. I could hear the pop and thwack of the ball, and the players' laughing voices.

Dr. Matthew Collins was a fat, middle-aged northerner with watching eyes as black and buried as coals in snow. I didn't like his watching. I didn't like him. I didn't like my sister having confided all the wounding things of her life to this fat Ulsterman. I didn't like that some of those wounds were done by me, as brothers must, and that he knew much more of me than I of him. I didn't like that his watching eyes saw another damaged O'Neill.

"So, you're looking for your sister." He leaned forward in his non-confrontationally arranged chair.

"Yes."

"How do you know she was coming here?" He took a cigarette from a pack of Silk Cut. "Mind if I smoke?"

"Well, actually . . ."

He lit up. "So?"

"I work in a bank. I did financial checks."

"Impressive. For someone from your family background, it would have taken some doing. Why do you need to find her so urgently?"

"To tell her Ma's dead."

"And?"

"And what?"

"In the words of the immortal Louis B. Mayer, 'If you want to send a message, use Western Union.' There's more to it than a death notice. What do you *really* want to tell her?"

There was a single cheer from the tennis match in the square: a key point taken.

"That she can come home. That it's all right, Ma's gone; now we can be the family we should have been."

"What makes you think you can start now? Have you the emotional resources to be a family? The only thing that held you together was your common fear and hatred of your mother. Now she's gone, what have you got?"

I said nothing for a long time. Collins watched me with his anthracite eyes. The sun came around, shining through the latticed window, illuminating the rows of battered paperback psychology texts on their dusty shelves. Cigarette smoke coiled upward like a spirit.

"You know, I've been working with Kerry for almost nine months." Collins said.

"I just thought you might have an idea where she went."

"You've been to Belgrave Road?"

"I have."

"Ah. I should tell you that Kerry didn't complete the therapy."

Another long silence listening to the cries of the tennis players. Collins lit another cigarette. I said, "Dr. Collins, what were you treating Kerry for?"

He took a long drag on his smoke.

"You've been to the house. You'd find out eventually. Your sister came to me in 2003, presenting early symptoms of type-four dissociative reaction."

"What is that, Dr. Collins?"

"A person divides his or her personality into sections, and begins to use different sections in different social contexts. In the advanced condition, alternative personalities can form."

"Are you telling me that Kerry was suffering from multiple personalities?"

"*Could* have suffered. It's a latent trait in about 7 percent of the population, usually the most creative and self-fulfilled."

"You're telling me you were treating Kerry for multiple personalities."

"Not initially, no. She presented with symptoms of depressive illness. It wasn't until therapy was well advanced that I began to notice discrepancies in her reactions in sessions."

"Discrepancies?"

"Body language, non-verbal cues, emotional reactions, the way she'd dress, do her hair, her makeup, her mode of talking, the type of answer she'd give, shifting emphases on childhood experiences."

"These would change from session to session?"

"Yes. The discrepancies widened as therapy progressed."

"I thought you were supposed to be making her better."

"Therapy digs deep. Old wounds bleed. It can be a threatening experience. I'm not one of these happy-clappy Dr. Loves handing out Prozac like candy. I'm just an old-fashioned talk-it-out, one-day-at-a-time-Sweet-Jesus cognitive grunt. It works. It changes things. It lasts."

"But not for Kerry."

"No."

"Would you tell me if you knew where she had gone?"

"I would tell you. You could try the flat again. They won't talk to me, they don't trust my profession. Emphatic onlys are the enemy. They might talk to you, especially as you share your sister's genes."

"I tried the flat. I told you."

"Try the flat again, I said. Things change. And if you do find her, let me know. I'd like to know how she's doing. If she's whole. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got a paying customer in five minutes, and I need to get ready."

The sun shone through the fanlight above the front door, casting a half wheel of light onto the stairs. I passed the tennis players in the street, two women in sweats and ponytails, their game finished. I beeped my car alarm, and starlings rose in a clatter of wings from the branches of the trees in locked Fitzwilliam Park; a sudden autumn, a denuding of leaves.

Lights were lit in the top flat of 20 Belgrave Road. I could hear the music from the street. Duh duh duh duh duh duh duh duhduh duh. A girl with shoulder-length bobbed blonde hair, wearing a shift dress over tartan tights, finally heard my ring over the bass.

"Hello. Could I speak to . . ." I hesitated. "Tarroweep?"

"Who?"

"Tarroweep."

"No one here by that name."

"I talked to her three days ago, here, on this doorstep."

The girl studied my face, frowned, and the creases in her features revealed her.

"*You*," I breathed. "It was you! Tarroweep. I suppose the walk-in walked out again?"

The girl looked blankly at me.

"I'm Clionadh. Tarroweep is . . . it's kind of hard to explain. Just that, if *she* met you, only *she* is going to remember you. Things *she* remembers, I don't. Things *I* remember, *she* don't."

Another self. A partitioned personality. Alternative lives. Type-four dissociative reaction, Dr. Collins had called it.

"I'm trying to find my sister. She lived here."

Clionadh/Tarroweep examined my face again. The Clionadh self spoke differently, carried herself differently, used different body language. Different person. Her eyes widened.

"Kerry."

"You remember her?"

"You're so like her. You could be twins. Sundered selves, twins. Oh God, yes! You're Stephen. She talked about you."

"Do you know where I can find her?"

"Find Kerry? No one can find Kerry. Kerry's gone."

I felt my heart kick, like a worm of ice and iron heaving inside its ventricles. Seeing my look of dread, Clionadh hurried to add,

"Jeez, everything's so *linear* with onlys! It's complicated. I really don't know where she is now, your sister, but there's a guy who might. Feargal. Kerry knew him; he's sort of on the edge of multi society. There's a pub down in Temple Bar; Daley's?" I didn't know it. Clionadh gave me directions. "I'll get in touch with Feargal. I'll meet you there about nine."

"Will I know you?"

"You mean, will *I* know *you*? Will I be Clionadh, who remembers you and Kerry? I'll know you. The cycles last about four, five days. I'm at the mid-point now, so you don't have to worry, I'll be Clionadh for a while yet."

"Clionadh." The girl had been closing the door. "Kerry. Is she; was she, like you? A . . ."

"Multi. It's just a word, like gay, or lesbian. Hey, don't you know, everyone's a tribe these days? Everyone's a minority. Kerry: *was* she? I suppose. *Is* she? Not anymore. I'm sure of that."

I tried to wear Clionadh's worldview like a pair of tinted glasses as I went down into Temple Bar. Not what she had told me about Kerry: I couldn't let that close to me yet, it was too sharp, too sudden, too penetrating. It would have killed me with its icy implications. I tried to see the nation behind her throwaway line that everyone was a tribe now. No mainstream. No society. No city, no state, no holy Mother Ireland for which the patriots died. No ultimate truth, no unifying vision. No racial destiny. But a thousand doors to God, a thousand paths to community, to

expression, to family and belonging. A thousand ways of being human. Bankers. Scared poets. All types. All tribes.

I read in those same color supplements where I learned about the Epsilon Eridani Ambassadors that micro-culturism is the logical end point of twenty-first-century post-industrialism. The fracturing of the human race into a billion interest groups will be complete when the nano-assembler experiments become a workable technology and every individual will have complete material self-sufficiency.

Amazing, what you can learn from the Sunday color supplements.

Around the turn of the century, Temple Bar, between Dame Street and Dame Anna Livia Pluribelle, had been the fashionable quarter of Dublin, the epitome of the mail-order eclectic that is post-modern Bohemianism. Long before the tribes began their migrations along the ley-lines to the Land of Youth in search of tolerance and freedom, Temple Bar had enjoyed a thriving sub-culture scene. Now its narrow streets and warehouses were the tribe capital of Europe. I passed transvestite and transsexual clubs, techno-Christian love-ups, tattoo dens, death-metal temples, rubber bars, New Revelation Buddhist urban monasteries, cyber-dweeb web-domes, White Rastafarian missionaries, neo-Celts, chilly-looking topless women in Native American feathers and leathers, gender-benders, androgynes, Seventies Revivalists, New Model mods, Star Trekkers, neo-Edwardians, New Age Samurai, manganauts on custom motorbikes, New Futurists, barbarian babes and boys. I saw Ambassadors, walking-in from Epsilon Eridani to sit in a doorway and roll a joint.

I tried to see them as Clionadh did—as Kerry might: facets of human experience, a plethora of possible alternative social selves. As I made my way through the crowds on Essex Street to the accompaniment of the primal heartbeat of warehouse Bass Addicts, I understood a second meaning to Clionadh's comment. Everyone is an interior tribe. We are all squabbles of aspects of ourselves that stand forward when life's changing situations call them. The difference between banker/poet/detective/emotional cripple Stephen O'Neill and Clionadh/Tarrowweep/Epsilon Eridani avian intelligence is the distance between facets. Mine are close, they reflect each other's light. Hers are far apart, and shine on their own. *I am large, I contain multitudes*, Walt Whitman yawped over the roofs of the world in his "Song of Myself." Yes, great singer of the ego, but the truth from the new millennium is that there is no Self any more, only a raucous flock of selves, flapping in every direction to world's end.

Daley's was the kind of bar where James Joyce could have drunk, or had been made to look like the kind of bar where James Joyce could have drunk. The latter, I thought, though the Edwardian pitch-pine booths, the encaustic tiles, the gas lights, and the faded back-bar mirrors advertising long-defunct whiskey distilleries were very convincing.

The clientele was more varied than I expected in a Temple Bar pub. But I suppose that's how a multi bar must be; everyone something different. Those someones who weren't temporarily part of some other sub-culture. Multi. I hated the taste of the word on my tongue. Multi. Kerry. It made her a thing, a condition.

Clionadh was defending a corner booth against four young males with pints in their hands. She waved. I squeezed in. A harassed bar boy took my order.

"Feargal says he'll be along about half nine," Clionadh said.

"Feargal. Is he a . . ."

"You have trouble with the word, don't you? Feargal? No. Maybe once. I can't tell. No one can. You'll see."

I contemplated the rising nebula of head in my freshly arrived Guinness.

"Do you mind if I ask you a question?" I had to shout over the boothless boys, who were singing "Fairytale of New York" in the mandatory raucous style. Early with the Christmas music this year. "I'm not sure how to ask this, but which is the real you: you here, or the other one, Tarroweep?"

Clionadh shouted with high-pitched laughter.

"Hey, Stevie, don't you know it's not etiquette to ask about others in front of the current? Currents never know alternates, that's the way the thing is. Onlys always want to know which is real. Answer, both. Clionadh is real, Tarroweep's real. What you really mean is, which is the original? Which came out of which?"

"Well, if it's not unforgivably rude . . ."

"Neither. Not as we are now. I can remember vaguely having been something like Tarroweep. Alternates develop their own independent memories. I suspect that Clionadh emerged out of the pre-Tarroweep's channeling exercises. You don't become an Ambassador unless you're part way multi."

"And this pre-Tarroweep, is she the original?"

"She was, I think. She may still be around; it's possible she's accessible from Tarroweep but not from me. I wouldn't know, you see. Separate memories. But what I remember of her, I don't think she was a very happy person. I wouldn't want to be her again."

I shivered in Daley's suffocating heat.

"And Kerry?"

"She moved in three years back. The place is well known in the scene as a multi house. Maybe the landlord is, or something. She moved into the flat across the landing. I liked her. Got to know her pretty well. She was on the edge of the scene, an emergent. Still had linkage between personas. Some can never fully make the break. Too much gravity in the black stuff down there in the memory."

Some never even begin, I thought. Broken goods. Smashed by the gravity of black stuff.

"Did she tell you how it, ah, started?"

"About your family? Her mother—your mother? Jeez, yes. She was seeing a therapist."

"I called in on him."

"The admirable Dr. Collins."

"He thinks the therapy may have been responsible for Kerry's break up."

"The word's 'emergence.' No, he might have hurried it along, but Kerry was a latent multi long before. She told me that when she was a kid and lay in bed at night and listened to your Ma raving away downstairs about what a martyr she was, what foul kids she had, how everyone was out to make her life miserable and no one loved her; she would lie there in the dark and imagine she'd been born someone else, in another house, with different parents, where everything was good and she could be what she wanted. When she had the big fight, when she left you all, she had the space to live that other life she should have had, be that other person she should have been."

I closed my eyes. It was not the smoke in the bar that had made them water.

"Ma's dead. That's what I came to tell her. Ma's gone."

"Good," Clionadh said fiercely. "Hey! He's here!" She jumped up, waving furiously. "Feargal! Over here!"

I thought about Tarroweep, the other, incommunicado side of this young woman beside me, and how she had not known Kerry when I had spoken to her on the doorstep of Number Twenty. Clionadh could not tell me why that was; I knew more of her alter ego than she did. Perhaps Tarroweep and Kerry never met under those identities. Tarroweep only knew the Kerry that should have been, whatever her name and nature.

Feargal was as Feargals should be; slightly out of date. Shaved head, tuft of chin beard from the Seattle look of over a decade ago. Unless what goes round had come round, down in Temple Bar. He had a Cork accent. He drank Beamish, as a good Cork man should. I watched him as he talked and could not dislodge the idea from my head that he had had sex with my sister.

"Kerry. Yeah. Came to us eight, nine months back."

"Us?"

"Everyone's an 'us' these days, friend. We're a group, a project, over in Mountjoy Square."

The old tenement terraces of the ten-to-a-room people, the bread-and-tay people who had birthed Sean O'Casey and Brendan Behan, had new tenants now. A race beyond their ancestors' conception, come creeping up the tenement steps and staircases, through the derelict high-ceilinged rooms, looking for a place to strike roots.

"A multi community?"

"Beyond the multi scene," Feargal said. "For multis who don't want to be multi anymore."

"She never really was, Stevie," Clionadh said. "She hated going back. Couldn't bear it that she would have to go back to it in the end. To what she was. The black."

"Found us," Feargal said. "They do. Don't advertise, keep ourselves to ourselves. Word passes. We could do this thing she wanted. Not cheap, but price okay to her."

"Her bank account was closed. That was you?"

"Standard practice."

"What did she buy from you?"

"Complete new life. Identity, history, memories, emotions, personality. Everything."

I thought they were fictions of films, those moments when the camera zooms in on the face of the hero while the background pulls out to infinity. They aren't. Art imitates life. The camera in my skull shrank the noisy, pushing bodies in Daley's bar to distant, buzzing insects.

Clionadh touched my hand. It felt like mist. Her face swam before me, at once remote and enormous, like a face painted on the side of a blimp. She was speaking.

"Okay? You okay Stevie? Feargal, is he all right?"

Daley's resumed its proper dimensions of sight and sound and smell.

"God," I whispered.

"Feargal," Clionadh said urgently.

"Lot to explain," Feargal agreed. "This isn't the place. Easier to show. She's all right, your sister. Believe me. She isn't hurt; we wouldn't hurt anyone, anything. But you should see. Then you'll understand, maybe."

The electric cab left us at the tenement in Mountjoy Square. The driver charged us wrong-end-of-town prices. Long long since I was north of the river. Tribal banners bearing a dozen different crests swung from broken street lights or flapped against the fronts of the old townhouses. Traveler campervans and trailers were nose-to-tail around the central grassed square: clusters of tents, bashes and refuse sack yurts had been erected on the small green. Goats grazed, skinny dogs scavenged, heedless of traffic. Campfires sent wreaths of sparks into the cold, clear night. There was music; many musics; overlapping tribes of sound.

It had begun with these traveling people, when Britain decided it could no longer tolerate a nomadic population. They came to Ireland, they found peace, they stayed, they spread the word. For most of its history, Ireland has exported its young, scattering its brightest and boldest and best like seed across the planet. Now the brightest and boldest and best were being gathered in from across the planet, and Ireland was a country of the young again.

The steps to the tenement stank of urine. I think it's compulsory.

As we climbed the spiral of worn stone stairs, Feargal explained that his project owned the whole apartment block. They'd needed somewhere big and cheap. The equipment. He paused on the first landing to call five names. Kerry's was not one of them. His voice echoed in the big, cold stairwell. Tracks of condensation ran down the glossy, institutional paint. A door opened on the next floor, a head appeared over the bannisters: a girl, shaggy blonde hair, age indeterminate, terrifyingly thin.

"Feargal! Feargal! I remembered! Bray beach! And they were there! All of them! But they never existed!" She giggled and disappeared. The door closed loudly.

"Trina's a transient." The name was not one of those Feargal had shouted out. "We're mostly transients. Nature of the community; you pass through on your way from somewhere to someplace better."

"And you?" I asked.

"Permanent. Eternal. Day-oner. Invented this place. Least, that's what I remember." I didn't understand why he smiled.

"And Kerry?" I asked.

He nodded up the stairs.

Feargal took us to the door at the top of the stairs, under the glass cupola. We entered the room beyond. It was dark but the acoustic and the chill of the air suggested immense size. The lights clanked on, battery by battery; heavy duty industrial floods. White light, white room: the old tenement attic, the length of the whole building.

The thing in the middle of the floor was white too. Feargal's footsteps echoed in the big white space as he crossed the floor to the machine. A faint pulse beat of street rhythm transmitted through the row of skylights. Feargal's expression as he stood before the device was a combination of pride and awe; Clionadh's, as she ran her hand over the white scanning ring, bewilderment and disgust.

The sheet on the padded vinyl surface was white, and neatly folded down at the top.

"Most of the work was already done by the end of the century. Complete map of the human brain. Scanned in sections by one of these things. Axon by axon wiring diagram. What fires in response to what stimulus. Took us to make the concept jump: what can read can be taught to *write*."

"You use that thing—scanner—to rewrite memories?"

"What are we but what we *remember* we are? We came up with a new model of the brain; as an imaging system. Memories move through the brain along established paths of neural activity."

"We?" I said.

"Six neuroscience researchers. With a vision. And some money. Imagination, my friend. That's all it takes. Imagination is the sister of memory. Imagine that other life, that other friend, those other relatives, parents,

and the scanner identifies the activated neurons, and imprints the image into memory. Single neuron e/m induction. Like making photographs from negatives. The long darkroom of the soul." Feargal fished a translucent plastic pharmaceutical tub out of his pocket. Such was the power of his metaphor, I thought for a moment it was a film can. He popped the lid, scattered white pills on the white sheet. The pills were stamped with the image of a flying dove.

"Acetylcholine activators. Play a double function in the process. Reinforces imprinted memory while depressing the existing engram on that site cluster so there is no conflict of memories. Beautiful. Remembering and forgetting. After a couple of months the memories become independent of the imagination; like Trina, down there in thirty-three. Works best on those with fugue state tendencies. Got a complete alternative personality with ready established memory routings, so much the better. Takes about four months for new memories and personality to become permanent; about six before the old memories and personality are supplanted and erased. One thing we can't erase; what we call the cognitive discontinuity: they remember the process of imprinting, but not why they came here."

"Kerry?" I asked.

"She's gone, man. Not here anymore."

He was smiling. He was proud of what he did. He was a savior; Jesus of the ganglia. Believe in me, be born again. A Jesus that stank of Beamish and cigarettes, with a fistful of pills. Suddenly I wanted very, very much to plant my own fist in the middle of that loop of beard around his mouth. I wanted to grab him by his sticking-out ears and smash his stubbly head against the scanning ring of his hideous machine, smash and smash and smash until his memories flowed from the cracks like grey juice. It was seething black bile, rising up my gullet, choking me. Anger.

Clionadh saw my clenched fist trembling. She did not speak. I did nothing. Again. *Again*. Ma was waxy and swollen with gas and rot, a week deep in the dark November soil, and still she would not allow me to be angry.

"I just want to find her," I said. "Tell her Mother's dead."

"I know," Feargal said. "I killed her. Here. In this. Down in the molecules."

"Just tell me where she's gone. That's all I want to know."

"She won't know you. She won't remember you."

More than Mother had been killed in that memory-imprinter. Louise died. Little Sean and Liam died. Da died. I died. Her sister, her nephews, her father, her brother. Everyone she had ever known. Pixie-faced Clionadh in her girlie dress and tartan tights; Tarroweep channeling in yet another persona: dead. Then my understanding inverted in that big, cold attic. It was *Kerry* who had died. The flesh moved on, the skin and the

senses, but Kerry O'Neill was buried in the soft folds of her cerebral cortex. Inverse metempsychosis. You don't come back as someone else. Someone else comes back as you.

I had lost her.

I was out of the attic and half a flight of stairs down before I was aware of Clionadh's heels clattering after me. I heard them stop and her shout out.

"Why don't you just *tell* him?"

I turned and looked up the stairs. Feargal was in the open attic door.

"What good would it do?"

"What hurt would it do?"

Feargal's laugh was coldly resonant in the stairwell.

"You ask me that, Clionadh/Tarroweep? A multi asks me where the hurt is in something coming back from your former life?"

The black anger inside me was just cold, hard sickness now. Gone.

"What former life?" Clionadh shouted defiantly. "There is no former life! You took it away. There's nothing to hurt her. But even for the chance to just see her, why hurt *him*?"

Feargal closed his eyes, rubbed the palm of his hand across his beard. He sighed. His breath steamed.

"We got principles here, you know. Hell, she's at Twelve Willows Community. Up north. Place called Ballydrain. County Down. On the big lough. Dara. She's called Dara. Dara McGann. She won't know you. Understand that. Be gentle. You hurt her, I'll find you, friend."

"I wouldn't hurt her," I said. "I'm her brother. Her family."

"Family hurts hardest and deepest. *Brother*."

A new wind had come down from the northeast, born in the great Siberian taiga, spreading unexpected cold and frost over Ireland. Winter always takes us by surprise in this country. The road north out of Dublin was a grind of nervy drivers and gritting trucks spraying salty shrapnel. Hitchhikers with cardboard signs for points north huddled on the verges in their inadequate clothes, disconsolate as winter crows. My car was too full of doubts and justifications for any other passengers.

Time. Time. Time. And excuses. Ten days lost. Too busy at work. Couldn't get time off. Pre-Christmas rush starting. Ma's estate to settle. Excuses. Ten days while I debated the rights and wrongs, and listed the pros and the cons, and decided for and against a dozen times each day, and made my mind up one way, and then the other, and then changed it again; about going to see Kerry. Dara.

Then the calendar told me this morning—Saturday morning—that it was December come Monday, and in a surge of dread, anticipation, and adrenaline, I found myself past the airport halfway down a tail-back behind a gritter truck, heading north. If December came and I did not see

Kerry—Dara—I never would. It was a November thing. The dying month.

Beyond Drogheda, the traffic cleared and the road opened. Low mist carpeted the plain of Louth, ankle deep, golden in the clear light. Forty kilometers across Dundalk Bay, the Cooley Hills were dusted with slight snow. North. We are a northern people, we Ui Neill. Appropriate that Kerry should return to the ancestral lands. I passed lay-bys and picnic areas crowded with the brightly painted transports of the traveling people. Smoke rose from their cooking fires. Children in colorful knitwear played with untrustworthy-looking dogs; dreadlocked, bearded men saluted gravely. I raised my hand to them in return. The women all looked cold. A nomadic nation. Rootless.

I began to explore what Kerry had done to herself in terms of a colossal act of self-definition. I am what I choose myself to be. I reject the self that is chosen for me. The Ma-made self. The uncertain, fearful, malleable self. I annihilate it. Down among the neurochemicals, I erase it with precise pulses of electricity and built in its place the self that I invent.

We are a tribe of putter-uppers, we Ui Neill. All we ever had was a choice of hells; so better to endure the lesser than risk the possibility of a greater. Put up. Shut up. Kids don't know that this is not normality. That this is not what family life should be. We can't be unusual, it must be the same for everyone else and they don't complain. Put up, shut up. Such conditioning can only be undone as deeply and painstakingly as it was done. Molecule by molecule. Cell by cell. Memory by memory. It's true, what the women who do it say: it takes more courage to leave than to stay.

I came up through Ravensdale, the old gap of the North. Snow lay in the lee of the hedgerows up by the old border. Down into Newry, then east of north-east, by B-roads along the northern flanks of the Mourne Mountains, through the neo-villages and techno-hamlets of the new tribes.

Kerry's—Dara's: I must not think of her by that other name—motivations were clear and honest. My own were obscure. I had realized when Feargal showed me the machine in the tenement attic that my role as bearer of news and repealer of exile was meaningless. I had no reason to find her. She had no reason to be found. Except that the detective-self could not walk away from an incomplete case. Except that my appearance out of an erased past, bearing dubious gifts, was no more selfish than Kerry's valuing me so little that she could blithely un-create me. I wanted to see her. I wanted to know that my sister's flesh still walked, and might talk to me. Once might be enough. To have not found her, to have left it open: how Ma would have loved that! Failed *again*, Stephen! That last fence would always be too high. Kerry's courage was to transform; mine was to find what she had transformed into. In November.

Up into the drumlin country of Down; those strange rounded glacial hillocks, clustered like eggs in a basket. Mist clung in the hollows between them. By the waterside communities of Strangford Lough; the boats reefed down for winter, the flocks of migrant Greenland geese working across the mud-flats. Through a speaking son, a deaf mussel-farming community directed me to Ballydrain and Twelve Willows.

The name was appropriate. The community cultured genetweak willow for the biomass power station up at the head of the lough. Accelerated growth and intensive coppicing gave two crops a year. The road wound a kilometer and a half between low drumlins studded with the twiggy crowns of willow before the turn-off to the community. I drove another kilometer and a half down a muddy lane rutted by cutters and timber transporters before a shield of woven willow twigs on the farm gate welcomed me to Twelve Willows. The community was a collection of sheds, silos, and portable buildings surrounding a much-extended Victorian farmhouse. Two large articulated timber transporters with trailers were being loaded in the yard by forklift. A lot of people were standing around, drinking coffee from a big vacuum flask. They looked very young. Tribe people do. There were lots of dogs and children. The men favored facial hair. The place smelled of wood chips, mud, and cold salt from the lough shore behind the farmhouse.

"Hello, I'm Stephen O'Neill," I said to the first person I met, a black-bearded man with a Bolivian-style knitted helmet. "I'm looking for"—careful—"Dara McGann. I heard she lives here."

"Dara. Yes." It was the woman operating the coffee flagon who answered. She was looking at me quizzically. "You are?"

Careful.

"A relative."

The coffee woman nodded.

"Close relative? You're the spit of her."

"We're all like peas in a pod, us O'Neills-McGanns."

"I can see that. Coffee?" I was offered a foam styrene cup. I accepted it gratefully. "I'm afraid Dara's not down at the house at the moment; she's cutting up on the back fifty. I can't say how long she might be; if you like, I'll take you up there on the quad; you'll never find it on your own."

Another offer gratefully accepted. The coffee woman—Maura; her real identity? was every Twelve Willower formerly someone else—took me on the back of a smoky all-terrain buggy up between the rows of tall willow wands. The wind from off the lough drew odd sighs and laments from the thin branches. A cutting machine was working the third hillside over, an oily yellow insect with voracious mandibles that bit the willow off at ground level and packed the rods into a metal basket on its back.

"Dara! Someone to see you!"

The machine turned at the end of a row and stopped. The driver

stepped down. I climbed off the quad and walked toward the cutting machine. Maura turned her vehicle and drove away.

She was dressed in work boots, skinny jeans gone green at the knees, a grubby Aran sweater under a padded Puffa jacket. She had grown her hair, dyed it a deeper, glossier black, wrapped braids in colored thread. She had lost weight. Her skin seemed darker. She stood with her feet apart, head slightly to one side as she studied me. She was frowning gently. I had never seen that frown before; I could not read it. I could not read her stance, her body language, her face, her hair, her clothes, anything about her.

I spoke a name. I was not certain which one.

The frown deepened.

"Who are you?" The voice was softer, lower.

"A relative. I'm . . ."

"I don't remember any cousins like you. What's your name?"

"Stephen. Stephen O'Neill."

Her face was suspicious now, her stance aggressive.

"Just who the hell are you? I don't know you."

"Don't you recognize me?"

"I see your face. You look like me. But I don't know you. I don't remember you. Who are you, Mr. Stephen O'Neill?"

I could walk or I could speak. There was another fence, right at the finish. The highest fence of all. It was not enough for me just to see. Things only ended properly with an act.

My breath hung in the frosty air in the field of cut willow.

"I'm your brother."

Dara lived in one of the mobile huts outlying the farmhouse. It smelled of fresh paint, new, cheap carpet, old incense, and garlic. It was drafty, and I could feel it shift on its blocks as the wind eddied underneath it. The one redeeming feature—and a considerable one—was the panoramic window overlooking the shore, the lough, and beyond it the sudden, startling lone hill of Scrabo, surmounted by a tower. I watched the Brent geese move across the sands before the incoming tide, searching for eel grass. Dara made herb tea.

Kerry had despised herb tea.

There were not many things in the chilly cabin. Few of the accumulated impedimenta of a life.

"You've got a bloody nerve."

I clutched my herb tea and struggled with the quiet inner strangling of guilt.

"This is my *life*, you know? *My* life. I say what happens in it, and I don't want people barging into it telling me they're my long-lost brothers, or whatever the hell else relations are out there. If I'd wanted a brother, I'd remember a brother. But all I remember is cousins. I'm an only."

I winced.

"You don't remember me at all?"

"I remember the discontinuity. I remember Feargal and the others, and the Mountjoy project."

"The scanner." The memory-damping pills, with doves stamped on them.

"You've been there?"

"Yes. How else could I have found you?"

"Jesus *Christ*, man! Did you ever stop to think that maybe, just maybe, the reason I *did* all this was because I didn't *want* to be found? I see your face. I see the similarities and I know, intellectually, that there was another life that I can't remember. I believe you are my brother from that life, but I don't know you. For all I know, *you* could be the reason I don't remember you. You could have raped me six times a night. I don't know. I don't *want* to know."

"Or you could have raped your sister," I said, careful not to spill any of the anger within.

"Yes."

"Or murdered her. Or murdered your mother."

"Yes."

"You could have done anything; there could be any number of reasons for you to have done what you did."

"Yes."

"You don't *know*. You *can't* know. You have to trust me. You see, the truth is, that you *did* murder someone, Dara. You murdered my sister." For an instant, I thought that she would smash me across the face with her mug of herb tea, or at least throw me out. I had never seen such darkness in Kerry's eyes. But I held her gaze, and the moment passed. I held the gaze for a long time.

"Do you want to know?" I asked. "So that you will have no doubts? It can't hurt you. It's only a story. Do you want to hear it?"

"Can I believe you?"

"Yes."

"Tell me."

I told her. It was a long time telling. It was not a tale where a few spectacular scenes would summarize and explain all. It was a slow dripping tale of a thousand, ten thousand tiny things, hour in, hour out, year in, year out, that wore away any sense of worth or individuality or hope or dream. Ten thousand stupid things. Ma's tantrums, her packing her bags and storming out to her sister's every time we would not eat our cabbage. Food control: only giving us things we hated to eat. Screaming fits in our teenages, when we would unexpectedly not come home for dinner. Being made to sit until the grease coagulated on the plate because we would not finish our Sunday dinners. Her inability to perform any domestic chore.

Clothes unwashed, or never ready when you needed them; house un-vacuumed and un-dusted; dishes unwashed. But if you tried to help, you were bloody bitches and bastards, trying to show her up. Personal hygiene. She stank. She would only wash if she was going out. She begrudged us hot water. Shampoo, a luxury. Toothpaste, outrageous. Yet she told us our teeth were black and rotting in our heads and threatened us with the dentist, who would rip them all out and give us agonizingly painful dentures. I remember—I will never forget—the day I saw her in the bedroom reaching down into her pants to remove a sanitary napkin. But when Louise and Kerry started their periods, she refused to buy them feminine hygiene products, but gave them cut-up ironing board covers to slip into their gussets.

Always always someone *else's* fault. Da's for being a feckless husband and not earning as much as Mrs. Downey next-door's husband. For having to be married to him, and not Mr. Donnelly the chiropodist, who would have amounted to something. Ours, for being bad, ungrateful, bloody bitches and bastards. For being Da's, and not Mr. Donnelly the chiropodist's. For living in Finglass—many stations lower than she expected of herself—where the neighbors did nothing but talk about her: that Mrs. O'Neill, thinks herself too good for the likes of us, the bloody bitch. Never never content. Everything you did was wrong. Right things were wrong, or she made them go wrong. Never a trip out or a holiday she didn't ruin. Never a friend of ours she didn't disapprove of, or whose mother she did not envy. Never never proud of us. I, the underachiever. Expected to be an accountant. Big house, big family, big future. Reality: a job in the bank, a flat in Dartry, single at thirty-two, a dream of poetry. Louise: to be a spinster primary school teacher. Coffee shop in Tallaght; husband and sons I was supposed to engender. Kerry: nothing. Imagination ran out at the inconvenient third child. Maybe a job in a shop. Maybe married. Certainly not college education. Certainly not five years in Dublin's top animation studio, producing award-winning pieces for ads and title sequences. Certainly not Dr. Collins's Fitzwilliam Square office, or the flat across the landing from Clionadh/Tarroweep in the house of multiple personalities, or the brain scanner in the big dark Mountjoy tenement attic. Or a winter hillside of green willow.

The light ebbed from the sky. The tide grew full and the geese moved ashore to roost among the tussocks of salt grass. Dara moved about the room, lighting candles. I sat in the center of a constellation of tiny flames, shaking with emotion.

"Jesus, Steve."

"Stephen. I'm a Stephen. Always was."

"Stephen, I don't know what to feel. What you told me, no kid should have to go through that. It shouldn't happen. It's not right. It's against everything that's right. But I can't *feel* it. I can feel it for you, but not for me. She wasn't *my* mother. She's not what I remember."

"What do you remember?"

She took a deep breath.

"I remember a white house with black paint. Gravel drive. Trees around it. A garden with hidden places where I played. No sisters, no brothers. Lots of friends, though. Lots of cousins. I remember a dog called Barney and a cat called Cat who slept on my bed though I wasn't supposed to let him. The sun shone a lot. Summers were hot, winters were ice and snow. You could hear trains in the house, and if you opened the windows, the sea. The kitchen smelled of coffee and baking and something I realize now is garlic. There was a big rotting Victorian wrought-iron conservatory on the sunny side of the house. Full of ferns. Mum would work there in all seasons. She was a writer. I was scared of her computer when she got it. I thought it would pull me in through the screen into the grey nothingness behind. Dad was in money, somehow. I'm still not sure exactly what. They were big, my parents. Not physically. Emotionally. Big happiness. Big laughter. Big joy. Big anger. Big love. Big hate. They sent me to dancing lessons, and drawing. They came to my school nativity play. They stuck my paintings up on the fridge, they listened to me read my school stories, they watched me dance in the conservatory. They gathered shells with me on the beach when we walked Barney. They gave me driving lessons. They were okay about lending me the car. They tried to get me to call them by their Christian names. They tried not to dislike my boyfriends on principle. They were glad when I went to study art and video. They came to my degree show. They bought me champagne at my graduation, and again when I began my first job, and again when I moved out into my first flat.

"They died in a car crash in Wexford when I was twenty-two."

The candle flames flickered; a draft, stolen in from the dark lough.

"Stephen, you all right?"

I realized that my cheeks were wet. Silent tears, for the deaths of parents that never lived. For the childhoods we should have lived. The childhoods of encouragement and approval and attention and devotion, where the pain was sharp and cut cleanly, not gnawing and gangrenous. Who was Stephen O'Neill to say it was not real? Dara McGann was building the rest of her life around what was inside her skull, and what more can any of us know than what that inner cinema projects onto the bone screen?

A good life. Maybe a better life.

"Stephen? You okay?" She poured me a whiskey. Kerry had been a clear spirits drinker. I nodded. My breath shuddered. "Stephen. Do you really have to go back to Dublin tonight?"

Dara's sofa was hard, her bed-throw thin and her cabin chilly but I slept like a god resting after creation. We had made it late over to the Big

House the night before—eating was communal at Twelve Willows. A couple of vanloads had already gone into nearby Newtownards in search of nightlife, but enough stayed behind to scrape us together two platefuls of leftovers and a couple of bottles from the community cellars. The food was vegetarian, and very good even to an unreconstructed carnivore. After much Guinness, instruments were broken out, and we played and sang our way through the hoariest numbers in the Old-Folkies-in-Aran-Sweaters song-book. They'd do it at the drop of a hat when there were sojourners in, Dara told me. Picking my way over the frost back to her cabin, I realized a strange thing. I was happy. Food, company, music. The ancient tradition of hospitality of the Culdee mystics, whose ruined monasteries ringed this lough, was reborn in the new orders and communities. Simple gifts. Direct living. Being, without necessarily becoming. Becoming, in its own time, like the shoots of green willow. I envied Dara her new life and family.

Sundays in Twelve Willows were only worked if you wanted to. Dara didn't. She took me out along the lough shore. The frost had settled hard in the night. Mist clung to the lough, glowing in the November sun, blurring the boundary between land and water. I shivered in my borrowed parka and Wellington boots and followed Dara's footprints out across the sand.

"What was she like?" she asked when I caught up with her. "What did she do? Who was she?"

"Bitter. Compassionate. Wild. Then again, always afraid. Contradictory. Tremendous, terrifying mood swings. From incredible, devouring energy to absolute desolation."

"Manic depressive?"

"No. I don't think it was clinical like that. She had to stop herself. She couldn't allow herself to go too far, achieve too much, be too free. Something had to pull her back to what she had been told all her life she was. Useless. Worthless. A waste of womb-space."

"Happy?"

"What does that mean?"

"What did she do?"

"She was an animator. She was brilliant; these freaky, scratchy, creaky collages out of old toys and dolls and bits of bone and wire. Won awards. Only she was so brilliant she kept her job, when the depressions hit her. You kept that bit of her."

"I was never brilliant. I would never have done anything like she did. Afraid to pay the price of brilliance. Stephen, what was her name?"

"Kerry."

She did not repeat it, not even shape her lips silently around it. Dara walked on over the tide-rippled sand. In the distance a flock of geese grazed, black atoms in the bright mist.

"What about you, Stephen?"

"What about me?"

"Happy?"

"I have a job I hate; no friends, can't get a woman, bursting for a shag, don't get out, going nowhere. And I find my sister has changed into another person and does not even know who I am."

"Who are you?"

"In here?" I touched my hand to the parka quilting. "I don't know."

"What would you like to be?"

The words came in a rush, like many wings.

"A poet." I blushed instantly. Dara saw it and smiled.

"What's stopping you?"

I knew the answer to that, but I was not brave enough to speak it. Dara continued.

"There are a thousand places like this where you're allowed to be whatever you want to be. A thousand ways to be Stephen O'Neill."

I stopped walking. Water oozed from the sandy impress of my borrowed boots.

"Dara. There's something I'd like you to have. Something that was Kerry's, that she left behind."

I fumbled out the silver bird brooch. Dara looked at the tiny, exquisite thing in the palm of her hand.

"Transmigration of the soul," I said. Curlews called, unseen in the mist.

"I could put you back," Dara said. "Go to Feargal, put you back into my childhood. The white house with the black paint and the trees around it. The Victorian conservatory. Barney the dog. Cat the cat. Make you my brother."

"Why?"

"I like you. You're . . . you. My brother. I need you, I think."

"Dara, I wouldn't fit into your childhood. Stephen O'Neill comes from that other childhood. What you remember could never produce me."

Dara winced. Her hand closed on Kerry's silver bird.

"Consider us separated at birth," I said. "Orphans, adopted into different families. Separate lives. Intimate strangers. Learning about each other. Because you aren't Kerry. You are the sister I should have had, that I never knew."

"Yeah," Dara said. She opened her hand and looked at the brooch. Then, suddenly, stunningly, she drew back her arms and threw it out over the sands. I saw it glitter in the sun, but I did not mark where it fell. We walked back across the tide flats toward the low willow-covered hills, following our water-filled footprints. Behind us, the feeding geese rose up and passed over us in a long straggling skein, calling to each other as they flew north. ●

NIGHT LAMP

by Jack Vance

Tor, \$23.95 (hc)

also Underwood Books [price not known] (hc)

New work from Vance—long one of this reviewer's favorite writers—is further between nowadays than during his peak productive years (and arguably his peak creative years) in the mid-to-late '60s. But as this stand-alone science fiction novel (something of an endangered species these days) indicates, it is well worth waiting for.

Night Lamp is set in the "Gaeen Reach," essentially the same far-future fictional universe that Vance has used for most of his best SF novels. Space travel is comparatively easy, and humans live on a number of planets throughout the galaxy, where they coexist with a number of alien races, as well as various groups of devolved or cross-bred humans. But while there are several connections to earlier Vance books (the Alastor series, for example, or the Cadwal trilogy), these are best seen as added pleasures for the long-time fan rather than prerequisites for understanding the new book. Readers coming to his work for the first time will find it easy enough to plunge right into the novel and

let the details of background and setting explain themselves.

The story begins on the planet Camberwell, where an unusually varied mixture of races and societies has made the world a mecca for social scientists from around the galaxy. Two of these are Hilyer and Althea Fath, an off-planet married couple. Middle-aged academics from the College of Aesthetic Philosophy on Gallingle, the Faths have come to study the lifestyles and music of the wild Vongo gypsies. By chance, they rescue a small boy, whose clothes indicate off-planet origin, from a near-fatal beating by a gang of local toughs. The boy's memory is all but destroyed, but they learn that his name is Jaro. Vance shows the reader a brief flashback from Jaro's point of view: a traumatic incident involving the death of his mother. Then the curtain closes on his past, as the Faths take Jaro back to their home world, and eventually adopt him.

The focus now shifts to Jaro, who grows up as an outsider in a society obsessed with status. This is the kind of scenario that in the past has provided Vance's imagination its best material, and in many ways he again rises to the occasion as he follows Jaro through his school years. Since the Faths

pay little attention to the various minutely defined markers and perquisites of the social ladder, Jaro is doubly an outsider on Gallingle. That several attractive girls of his age find him interesting makes him an even greater target for scorn from his more conventional schoolmates. Cleverly turning the tables on them, Jaro grows into a resourceful young man, with no fixed purpose in life until he unexpectedly loses his adoptive parents. At that point, he goes in search of the secret of his origins.

That search takes him to the planet Fader, circling a distant star known as Night Lamp, and inhabited by a barbaric race known as the Roum. Vance develops this exotic setting with the same virtuosity as Gallingle, at the same time leading to an effective surprise resolution to the mystery of Jaro's origins and the death of his mother. (For that matter, Vance throws in two or three more miniature portraits of bizarre societies, which impinge upon the story in various ways; he can conjure up a stranger world in a few paragraphs than many writers can manage in whole trilogies.)

Vance's way with the language is one of the great treats of science fiction (though no brief quotation can do it justice). He may be more verbose than at his peak, but it is hard to imagine that many of his fans will be sorry to get extra measure from such a fine stylist. It is also good to report that the thinly concealed misogyny that made much of his recent work uncomfort-

able to read is largely under wraps, this time out. But his treatment of "primitive" races remains very much that of a man whose opinions were formed before 1950, and whose experience has largely confirmed his beliefs. In all fairness, those opinions may be responsible for the gusto of his portrayals of alien races, reveling in the pure unalterable *differentness* of the societies he invents. But readers of a younger generation might be pardoned for refusing to accept all the conclusions he seems to draw from premises we do not share.

More than almost any other writer of his generation, Vance has stayed on track, writing the kind of fiction he made his first impact with, while retaining his grasp of craftsmanship and avoiding the trap of self-imitation. Vance's productivity has understandably slowed with his increasing years; apparently, he has decided to concentrate on books, and readers fond of his brilliant novellas such as "The Moon Moth," "The Last Castle," and "The Dragon Masters" are likely to join me in wishing he could still find time for work at that length. But *Night Lamp* shows there's still plenty left in the well.

SYNTHESIS AND OTHER VIRTUAL REALITIES

by Mary Rosenblum

Arkham House, \$21.95 (hc)

The stories in this handsome, illustrated collection all appeared in *Asimov's* between 1990 and 1995, the majority of them in 1992 and

1993. They represent a good cross-section of Rosenblum's maturation as a short-story writer. They should also be of particular interest to the readers who got to observe her in the process of developing her distinctive voice and approach.

The author photo that serves as frontispiece to this edition sets the tone, in many ways: It shows Rosenblum sitting on the side of a low bank, her feet on the bottom of a dry gully. The arid-looking landscape extends to the horizon, with no sign of any human presence other than her own. This is very much the landscape in which many of her stories take place.

Most of Rosenblum's tales are set in the near future—many of them in a western US whose farmlands are parched by long-term drought. The government has essentially abdicated control over the droughtlands, and much of the population has emigrated to the coast, where the cities survive on water melted from icebergs hauled up from the Antarctic. In the dried-out backcountry, a few children are being born with abilities for which we have no better word than "magic"—although their powers are neither understood nor quite accepted by most of those around them. Against this bleak background, Rosenblum sets her stories: dramatic episodes told in deceptively quiet prose, yet often hinging on extreme violence and radical departures from our present-day reality.

"Water Bringer" shows us a rural community visited by a man

claiming to be a government surveyor who can find them water; the twist is that we see his visit largely from the point of view of an autistic boy who has the ability to project lovely mental images. In "The Rain Stone," three adolescents, two boys and a girl, go into the open country to herd the goats on which their community depends. The external threats they face are serious enough, but the story is at least as much concerned with the internal dynamic of their growing sexual awareness and with the possibly magical artifact after which the story is named. In both tales, there is as much going on inside the characters' heads as in the world outside. And in both stories, the bleak external circumstances are mitigated by something magical.

The same is true of "The Centaur Garden," where a disaffected young musician fleeing an oppressive urban environment happens upon a female centaur—genetically engineered, of course—and finds himself in a philosophical discourse about love, the essence of humanity, and the morality of the science that has created her. Meanwhile, the centaur's creator is actively hostile to the musician, and is marshaling all his resources—right up to the threat of fatal violence—to drive him away. The tension between the various levels of the story gives it unusual emotional complexity.

The collection's title story, "Synthesis," is almost a literal working-out of a philosophical principle. On the surface, it seems to begin by

updating an idea that was already a cliché when Al Jolson filmed it as *The Jazz Singer*: the gifted artist whose father cannot understand his inspiration, let alone why he wishes to abandon his heritage. In this case, the young man is a computer artist, creating vast virtual reality environments; the father is the head of a traditional Chinese family business empire. Rosenblum's twist is the addition of a third element: a young outlaw hacker whom the artist discovers meddling with his work, and who allows the dialectic of father and son to find a resolution.

Rosenblum's consistent focus on family relationships—they also play important roles in "Entrada," "Border Town," and "Flood Tide"—gives her work an unusual emotional impact. But while youth predictably seeks to break away from parents anxious to preserve the status quo, these do not offer a pat resolution to the archetypal conflicts. The older generation sometimes fights to the bitter end, at other times it sees it will gain more by conceding; sometimes youth gives up the fight—for a while—and sometimes it simply deserts the battlefield. Rosenblum is careful not to let her portrayal of relationships become repetitious, but she makes effective use of them to add tension and depth to her stories.

Arkham House is one of the few publishers still willing to put out a single-author short fiction collection by anyone who is not already a first-magnitude star. On the strength of her offering here,

Rosenblum certainly deserves the additional exposure this collection will give her. Readers of this magazine, who are obviously among the primary consumers of SF at shorter lengths, should find this book (with atmospheric illustrations by Elizabeth Lawhead Bourne) especially worthwhile.

THE GOLDEN KEY

by Melanie Rawn,
Jennifer Roberson & Kate Elliott
DAW, \$24.95 (hc)

In the abstract, this hefty tome (770 pages, in a smaller than usual type size) looks like a marketing department's dream: take three of DAW's most popular writers and turn them loose on a generational fantasy saga—in effect, a one-volume trilogy, with a complete novel by each of the three authors. Add a Michael Whelan cover (a self-portrait, at that), and how can it miss? DAW could print a zillion copies, and the chain stores would gobble them up, just based on the package and the authors' sales records. It hardly seems likely to matter what's between the covers.

Surprise—Rawn, Roberson, and Elliott have delivered a performance as classy as the cover. Set in Tira Virte, a fantasy realm reminiscent of Renaissance Italy, the trilogy portrays a society where important events are recorded not in writing, but in painting. Contracts, treaties, marriages, wills, all are preserved on canvas; and, because the artists of Tira Virte have learned to infuse their paint-

ing with magical images and spells, the official paintings actively work to enforce the events they record. Therefore, the Grand Dukes of Tira Virte have come to consider the appointment of the official artist—the Lord Limner—one of the most important at their disposal.

As the story opens, we learn that a formerly prominent family of artists, the Grijalvas, has fallen out of ducal favor. One reason lies in an historic battle in which the Tza'ab (the hereditary enemies of Tira Virte, of different race and religion) captured and raped a number of Tira Virtean women. When, after their rescue, the women were all found to be pregnant, the Grijalvas took in the children and raised them as their own—earning, in consequence, the reputation of dealing in forbidden magic—and the official enmity of the state church. At the same time, the Grijalvas lack the political acumen of their rivals, the Serranos. Two young people are about to change that.

Sario and Saavedra are two young Grijalvas, both with the Gift that would permit them to blend magic into their painting—though by custom, only men are allowed to pursue the art. Thus Sario can set his sights on becoming Lord Limner; Saavedra is destined to bear the family's children. (The Gift carries a heavy price: not only are its male bearers sterile, but they are destined to grow old prematurely, and die at a young age.) But Saavedra is as ambitious as Sario; she manages to get herself appointed official concubine to the Duke's heir

apparent, planning to persuade him, when he comes to power, to appoint Sario Lord Limner.

What Saavedra doesn't know is that Sario is madly in love with her, and consumed with jealousy when she allows another to have her. Moreover, Sario has secretly studied with an old Tza'ab who teaches him deeper and more powerful magic than any known to the orthodox artists of Tira Virte. Driven equally by ambition and jealousy, he perfects his technique and his magical skills to an unprecedented level, easily gaining the post of Lord Limner. At this point, he puts into effect two plans, both of which depend on the forbidden Tza'ab magic he has learned: he imprisons Saavedra in a painting, removing her from the world so no other man can possess her; and he uses his art to transfer himself into the body of a younger man, thus escaping the premature death that is the fate of the Grijalvas. Thus art has literally conferred immortality on both Saavedra and Sario.

Thus begins a multi-generational saga of how Sario, in different embodiments, plays the role of a sinister power behind the throne throughout the history of Tira Virte. He always transforms himself into a younger Grijalva (how else could he be certain of finding a painter with sufficient ability to extend his immortality?), and over the years, accumulating generations of knowledge and technique, he transforms the nation's art. But at the same time, the nation is

changing, and not even an immortal can fight the tides of history. More than once he is thwarted in his goals, and must retreat into a younger body and bide his time. And in the end . . . well, let's say his story comes to a highly satisfactory conclusion.

There is no indication which author wrote which section of the story, but none of the three are sufficiently distinctive in style or approach for it to make a great difference. Tira Virte and its people are painted in deft strokes, and the reader comes away with a sense of a credible country with a history of its own, and thumbnail sketches of a world beyond it. But the real focus of the trilogy, as one would expect from its authors' previous work, is on character. The Machiavellian Sario provides a strong focus of intrigue involving a whole cast of other characters, across a span of history from late medieval times to the era of democratic revolution. Readers who enjoy large-scale quasi-historical fantasy (say, on the model of Guy Gavriel Kay's recent work) will find this one right on target.

GODMOTHER NIGHT

by Rachel Pollack

St. Martin's, \$24.95 (hc)

Pollack's latest begins as an almost mainstream story of two young women who fall in love, but as it grows, it takes on increasingly fantastic overtones, and eventually blossoms into a symbolic exploration of life and death.

As the story opens, we meet Laurie and Jaque, who meet at college, fall in love, and (after Laurie drops out of graduate school) move in together. We see them making the transition from student status to the workaday world, their lesbian lifestyle keeping them in touch with a funky underground culture—one inhabitant of which is the mysterious Mother Night. A small red-haired woman dressed in patchwork and extravagant jewelry, she appears at crucial intervals, often attended by the short-haired, leather-clad Motorcycle Girls, who wear her name on the backs of their jackets.

Pollack plays the early stages of the novel with a very light hand, poking gentle satiric fun at modern academic and urban life. The tone remains light as we meet the heroines' stereotypical parents, and follow Laurie's abortive grad school career. But after Laurie's father attempts to rape Jaque, we begin to get a hint of just how much power Mother Night wields, as she and the Motorcycle Girls exact revenge in a terrifying ceremony. And at the end of the first section, Jaque tells Laurie her most secret wish: to become a mother.

At first Laurie is uncertain whether she shares Jaque's desire for a child. But eventually, with the help of an anonymous sperm donor and a warm turkey baster, Jaque gets her wish: a daughter whom she names Kate. Jaque's recovery from childbirth is slow, and the reality of raising a child is different from the dream of having

one. Then Jaque becomes seriously ill, and *Mother Night*—suddenly revealed as Death incarnate—comes to visit. After promising to be Kate's godmother, she takes Jaque's life—and leaves Laurie in charge of the girl's upbringing.

At this point, the focus of the novel shifts to Kate, who grows up as a young girl seeing things the others around her can't. *Mother Night* visits her often, although Laurie makes it clear she does not approve of the strange old woman. And Kate can see the dead, who walk the streets of the city unnoticed and unrecognized by the living. She makes friends with the ghost of a young boy, Jimmy, who enjoys playing pranks on living adults—only to lose his friendship when she intervenes to stop an entire community of the dead from annoying the living. Another crisis arises when the father of one of her schoolmates dies, and Kate asks *Mother Night* to bring him back, only to learn that Death cannot pick and choose those whom she will take.

In partial compensation, *Mother Night* gives Kate the formula for a magical potion that will cure the deathly ill. There is one condition for its use: if *Mother Night* appears by the foot of the patient's bed, the medicine will work. If she stands at the head, the patient is doomed. The novel then jumps a number of years to find Kate a famous healer, thanks to *Mother Night*'s potion. But her ties to the human world are too strong for her to accept the restriction on the potion's use: in the end, she insists on substituting

her own judgment for that of *Mother Night*, and in the end must pay the price for her defiance of Death's commands.

Pollack deftly combines contemporary fantasy and folklore material—many readers will recognize the final chapters of *Godmother Night* as a reworking of one of the darker Grimm tales, and there are undoubtedly other echoes of traditional material that I have missed. The author's focus on lesbian issues might at first glance seem to limit the appeal of this novel, and it would be difficult to imagine the book rewritten as a heterosexual love story; but its treatment of gender issues is neither annoyingly self-congratulatory nor blatantly polemical. In fact, *Godmother Night* is thoroughly ingratiating, without ever dodging the difficult issues it confronts—life, death, love, sexuality—in short, the entire human condition. Considering its imaginative audacity, its broad emotional range, and its sure handling of both traditional and modern elements, I would not be at all surprised to see this book among next year's World Fantasy Award finalists.

EVERYBODY'S COMET: A LAYMAN'S GUIDE TO COMET HALE-BOPP

by Alan Hale

High Lonesome, \$12.95 (hc)

For the casual sky-watcher, comets remain among the most fascinating of astronomical spectacles. Comet Hale-Bopp, which astronomers believe may dominate the skies during the early months

of 1997, is the latest in a long string of these visitors. This book, by one of its discoverers, is a thorough but good-natured and down-to-earth account of comets in general and Hale-Bopp in particular. (The book also includes a preface by Janet Asimov and a foreword by Thomas Bopp, who sighted the comet on the same night as Hale.)

Hale found "his" comet almost by accident one night in early 1995, looking through his backyard telescope at the star cluster M70. (Co-discoverer Bopp's sighting was equally fortuitous; although he had been an amateur astronomer for twenty-five years, he did not even own a telescope when he spotted the fuzzy spot of light through a friend's instrument, during a Saturday night star-gazing party.) At the time, neither man realized that the object they had identified as a new comet was anything special. Only when subsequent observations allowed scientists to calculate its orbit did it become apparent that Comet 1995 O1 (its official designation in the initial reports by the International Astronomical Union) was considerably farther away (and therefore much brighter) than most newly discovered comets.

Just how much brighter became apparent as more data came in. In fact, Hale-Bopp had been discovered at a greater distance than any previous "new" comet. (Halley's Comet was spotted at a greater distance on its last return, but its orbit is one of the best-known of any

comet.) And since its perihelion (nearest approach to the Sun) was determined to be very close to the distance of Earth's orbit, the ingredients for a spectacular display seemed to be in place. In fact, Hale-Bopp has the makings of a "Great Comet," one of those rare celestial visitors that catches the eye of even the most unscientific observer.

Of course, those who remember the disappointing shows given by the highly touted Comet Kohoutek, or even the latest return of Halley, are likely to be skeptical. Hale is quite aware that his namesake might fizzle, and goes into detail describing some of the ways it might happen. In the process, the reader will learn a great deal about comets, and about the geometry, chemistry, and physics that combine to make some comets brilliant displays to the naked eye while most are spotted only by specialists with high-powered instruments.

But there are additional fascinations to comets, and Hale does not slight them. Ancient peoples believed them to be the harbingers of war, plague, and assorted other disasters; one fifteenth-century pope exhorted the faithful to pray for salvation from a comet then visible in the Mediterranean skies. Only a century later, Tycho Brahe was the first astronomer to determine that comets are phenomena not of the Earth's atmosphere, but of outer space. And a century later, Edmund Halley made his famous prediction of the return of the comet now named for him.

Nowadays, we are also aware

that comets sometimes collide with the planets—Comet Shoemaker-Levy 9's multiple impacts on Jupiter made it quite clear exactly what that entails. A large crater near the Yucatán village of Chicxulub is probably the impact site of the comet that brought down the dinosaurs. Predictably, when Hale-Bopp was first described, several tabloids ran stories warning that its orbit was expected to intersect that of Earth—despite the fact that nothing of the sort is even remotely possible on this approach. Hale takes these stories as evidence that scientific literacy is still sadly lacking in the general population; in some ways, we have come only a short distance from our superstitious ancestors.

Everybody's Comet is a handsomely produced book, with plenty of useful illustrations (especially in the section showing readers where

to look for Comet Hale-Bopp during the months it is likely to be visible). Hale points out other astronomical events of interest during Hale-Bopp's visit, as well, including two solar eclipses (one visible from Siberia, the other from the northern tip of South America). And in an appendix, he gives not only additional reading, but advice on astronomical equipment (he does not recommend buying a telescope just for one comet), and even a list of science fiction novels dealing with comets. But perhaps the most interesting section is the author's afterword, in which he describes his own career as a Ph.D. scientist with no job opportunities, and urges efforts to promote broader understanding of the workings of science, and of the universe that science has described. This book is an excellent starting point for those efforts. ●



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16 March '97

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Several fanzine and SF folksinging meets this time. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 13107B Autumn Wood Way, Fairfax VA 22033. The hot line is (703) 449-1276. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons) leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, with a musical keyboard. — Erwin S. Strauss

JANUARY 1997

30-Feb. 1—HurriCon. For info, write: 328 North Eglin Parkway, Ft. Walton Beach FL 32547. Or phone: (904) 863-8810 (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Ft. Walton Beach (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Holiday Inn Beach Resort. Guests will include: G. A. Effinger, B. Hambly, M. Weis, G. Roen.

31-Feb. 2—VidCon. (813) 677-6347. (CompuServe) 74367,312. Tampa FL. Multi-media fanzines, 100 expected.

31-Feb. 2—UK Filk Con. Rozel Hotel, Weston super Mere. Sue Mason, Mary Ellen Wessels. SF folksinging.

FEBRUARY 1997

7-9—VisionCon. (417) 886-7219. (AOL) vscon. Clarion Hotel, Springfield MO. Capps. Comics, anime and gaming.

14-16—Boskons, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. (617) 625-2311. Sheraton Tara. John M. Ford, Ron Wakotsky.

14-16—Attitude, 14 Prittlawall Sq., 1st floor, Southend-on-Sea SS1 1DW, UK. Abbey Hotel, Greet Malvern.

14-16—Gallifrey, Box 3021, N. Hollywood CA 91609. (818) 752-8378. Airtel, Van Nuys CA. John Levene. Dr. Who.

14-16—RadCon, 2527 W. Kannewick Av. #162, Pasco WA 99336. (509) 943-0713. Red Lion, Pasco WA. F. M. Busby.

20—Organia, B. Cesar Mota, Rua Cabralia 30 #501, Belo Horizonte MG 30240-080, Brazil. (031) 225-2636. Star Trek.

21-23—JohnCon, HopSFA, OSA, 122 Merryman Hall, JHU, Baltimore MD 21218. (410) 235-3659. Johns Hopkins Univ.

21-23—GeoCon, Gsming Guild, CAB 320, Evergreen State College, Olympia WA 98505. (360) 866-6036. On campus.

28-Mar. 2—Potlatch, Box 31848, Seattle WA 96103. (206) 634-3828. Plaza Hotel. Writing-oriented intimate affair.

28-Mar. 2—Reality Check, Box 178, St. Leonard MD 20685. Loew's Annapolis, MD. Cherryh, Effinger.

MARCH 1997

7-9—LunaCon, Box 3566, New York NY 10008. Hilton, Rye Brook NY. Cherryh, D. Cherry, M. O'Hare, M. Walsh.

7-9—ConChord, Box 61172, Pasadena CA 91118. (715) 530-3546. Airtel, Van Nuys CA. L. Warner. SF folksinging.

7-9—KatsuCon, Box 11582, Blacksburg VA 24062. Holiday Inn Executive Center, Virginia Beach VA. Anime fans.

8—FanimeCon, Box 8068, San Jose CA 95155. (408) 293-1821. Foothill College, Los Altos CA. For anime fans.

8-9—Sci Fi Comedy Con, Box 30, Navan Co. Maath, Ireland. (01) 825-0811. Parnell Square, Dublin. D. Prowse.

14-16—ConamaZoo, Box 1546, Evanston IL 60204. (708) 328-8765. Battle Creek (Ill) Hotel. W. Wardrop, K. Nemat.

14-16—RevelCon, Box 980744, Houston TX 77098. (713) 526-5625. Courtyard SW, Houston TX. Media fanzines.

14-16—Corflu, 2305 Bernard Av., Nashville TN 37212. (615) 383-5763. Lighthouse, Pacifica CA. Old-line fanzines.

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